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THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN

MEGGIE ALBANESI

BY
HER MOTHER

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To the Memory of My Husband

CARLO ALBANESI

THE ADORED FATHER OF EVA AND MEGGIE

I dedicate this little book about our child.

E. M. A.

“A great and sensitive artist ;
a great teacher ;
a great gentleman ;
and one whose place can never be filled.”

*The tribute of his colleagues when he died,
September 1926.*

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ERRATUM

The wording under illustration facing p. 176 should read

MEGGIE'S FATHER
CAVALIERE UFFICIALE CARLO ALBANESI

FOREWORD

M EGGIE ALBANESI : I only saw her play seven parts in all : " Jill " in *The Skin Game*, " Wanda " in *The First and the Last*, " Mabel " in *Loyalties*, " Lady Jane " in *Shall we Join the Ladies?*, " Sidney " in *A Bill of Divorcement*, " Trelawney " in the first act of *Trelawney of the Wells*, and " The Twin " in *The Lilies of the Field*. And yet her death gives me a sense of eclipse. It is as if the Dark Remover had filched the brightest, steadiest little lantern of all.

Her technique was good and clean, for she was trained under Helen Haye, that past-mistress of sure effects ; her individuality was exceptionally strong, yet, I think, would never have crystallised into—just Meggie Albanesi, on the stage ; she had real devotion to her art, great quickness to seize shades of meaning, and a brain which she did not hesitate to use.

But none of these qualities, nor all of them together, account for just the sense of loss that her death brings. She had a various and unique faculty of emotional truth. I never saw her (and I watched her through some sixty rehearsals) fumble, blur, or falsify an emotional effect. She struck instantaneously, and as if from her heart, the right note of feeling. Those who have had much to do with play production will understand how excessively rare such a quality is.

For me, her most beautiful achievement as a whole was her Polish girl, Wanda, in *The First and the Last*. I could never watch that except through a certain mist. But I think that she reached her highest pitch of emotional truth in the final scene of *A Bill of Divorcement*. In both those plays, indeed, she passed quite beyond acting.

There was never any doubt about her effects, the edges of her impersonations were so clean-cut ; each movement and each phrase carried over to one—clear, decisive. As “Jill,” as “Lady Jane,” and “The Twin,” she marked quite definitely her delicate sense of comedy.

She was not limited. She would have gone very far.

Not often does Death so wastefully spill.

MEGGIE ALBANESI

WHEN Meggie was taken from us with such tragic suddenness, and tributes from innumerable pens followed her in her passing, dealing with her as she was known in her public career, many of those who loved her very dearly came to me and asked me, as her mother, to write all about her little life from the home point of view. But I refused over and over again, because I was too stunned by grief and anguished by the sense of the inexorable separation from one who, although she was my child, I think I might describe as being one of the most lovable creatures imaginable.

Since then, however, I have felt every now and then that it would help me a little if I did write about her, and I have at last responded to the suggestions made to me so frequently, and I am going to try to put down, in what I fear will be a very broken fashion, the story of

Meggie as a little child, a schoolgirl, a student, and a very young actress.

It seems to me, however, even before I make a start, that it will prove far, far more difficult for me to write than any work of fiction, because in my ordinary groove I am mistress of my own creatures, I can design their progress just as my imagination dictates, and as they grow obedient to my wishes, and gradually work out the scheme of the story, they come almost naturally to their ultimate fictional destiny. But the life-story of Meggie is not a novel; it is a compilation of memories, facts, episodes, all real happenings shaped and restricted by truth.

The first and the dominant fact which comes clearly into my mind as I search backward in my memory is the realisation of the happy normal infancy and childhood of my little girl. I suppose to every mother each child shows promise of big things—quickness, cleverness, awakening of character—and I was a very everyday mother! And now, as I seek to recall all manner of little incidents which resolve themselves gradually out of the mind-pictures

of the past, I shall try to show Meggie from babyhood, and set forth her own way of meeting the nursery difficulties, and the vexations, and the joys, and the problems which beset the path of every intelligent little creature. And so I shall proceed, as I have already said, to bring her through childhood, school, and student days, and her early stage career, till we arrive at the creature of temperament, of moods and emotions, of amazing courage, of equally amazing will-power, of love and charm, of achievement and brilliant promise, which Meggie was at the time of her death.

In such a young life (she had only just attained her twenty-fourth birthday, while her stage career numbered only six years) I feel I must crave indulgence and sympathy if I dwell, in no definite sequence, on little tales which may seem trivial and of no real importance, but which, one and all, are valuable because they show the drift of the child's mind, her thoughts and actions, and more especially the development of a personality which at once impressed itself upon all those who were brought in contact with her even as a baby.

Meggie was born as quickly as she possibly could be born on a Sunday afternoon, October 8th, 1899—the eve of the start of the Boer War—and her first slumber song was “The Absent-Minded Beggar,” sung in varying keys by the nurse. Personally, I fear I must confess I thought her a plain little morsel of humanity, given to extremely shrill protests against her entrance into the world. But I speedily changed my opinion when she became my very special property, as she did for several months, during which time I combined the duties of a nursing mother with that of an imaginative writer. And, as these months slipped away, she gradually grew into a beautiful baby, generally taken at first glance to be a little boy. When she was about a year and eight months old, a sturdy, happy, naughty little girl, not endowed with great fluency of speech as yet, but quite capable of demonstrating by action the way she wished matters to go, she and her sister began their acquaintance with the country and its many joys, and this is where her life-story also began to run.

A wide window in a queer old farmhouse, a

window that looked out over a large expanse of rough pasture, and having a broad pathway leading up to the high-road. Poultry of various breeds picked their way about the common, on which also sheep and lambs were scattered, and outside the railing of the garden, which stood just beneath the window, there might perhaps be a team of very small pigs standing with their snouts pushed through the railings staring at one fixedly with their queer little eyes. It would need only a suggestion of a sound to send these small pigs skid-daddling in every direction.

And, as I would sit looking out of the window, a sound would come. Nearer and nearer it would come—someone calling in a shrill voice protestingly, angrily, to a little toddling figure running uncertainly, yet progressing with extraordinary rapidity down that rough road from the highway, and falling more than once as she ran. It was such a very rough path, with ruts cut deep in it by the wheels of heavy farm waggons, and plenty of stones covering the surface and inevitably causing a stumble now and then. But that little baby figure, in its white smocked overall and its broad straw hat,

was undeterred by stones and stumbles. When she fell down she got up again quickly, and on she would run steadily, ignoring the voice of the pursuing nurse in the most determined fashion.

It was an everyday occurrence. Meggie first, and the nurse, red faced and angry, coming next. I always knew what was going to happen. Before I could rise to go to meet her that errant little creature would come rushing through the porch and open doorway into the room, and then she would stumble on my knees, breathless and panting with her exertion, and would wind herself into my arms. Scarlet faced, irate, stiff with a sense of outraged dignity, would follow nurse. And this is what generally passed :

“ I do wish, ma'am, as you'd speak to Miss Baiby. She just *won't* go into the maal-cart. And do look at her legs ! There they are again, all bleeding and cut about worse nor ever ! ”

With her little face buried almost under my arm, Meggie would be absolutely indifferent to these remarks. And when I, with what I hoped was a certain amount of dignity, desired



Photo by Lafayette, London

MEGGIE AT THE AGE OF FOUR YEARS

nurse to bring a basin of water and a towel (and the child never even winced as the wounds were bathed), I would take on the duty of teaching wisdom, if not obedience.

“ Meggie love, just look at your poor legs ! ”

The hot little bundle under my arm would glance down at the bruises and make a grimace.

“ Meggie, to please Mummy, won't you go in the mail-cart ? ”

Stiffening in my arms, a pause, and then a resolute voice : “ No ! ”

“ But, love, *do* look at your legs ! I'm sure they must hurt you very much. Sweetheart, won't you promise Mummy to go in the cart ? ”

But once again would come the same resolute little voice : “ No ! ”

And, to all my rather feeble suggestions of falling in with nurse's views, I always got the same steady, determined reply : “ No ! ”

And so finally the mail-cart was relegated to the coach-house, and Meggie ran, and fell, and cut herself, and revelled in her triumph over authority.

Will-power, determination, courage—these qualities were born in Meggie, mingling in with

that sense of joy in being alive which was so characteristic when she was a very little child. Having come into the world in such a hurry, she seemed destined to forge her way through all difficulties. At any rate, she had a sense of independence when most children are nothing but helpless little bundles of humanity. Her courage was something extraordinary! She was really fearless, and would wander in and about the stockyard which adjoined our farmhouse, and love nothing better than to follow the waggoner into the stables, and watch him groom his farm horses, generally getting, as a treat, a ride on the back of one of these big animals. And then she adored the calves, and the little pigs, and she was great friends with our pony, whilst any dog that came Meggie's way was welcomed and caressed.

Living far out of the world, as we did at that quaint old farm, our domestic arrangements were certainly primitive. Our meat, for instance, always had to be brought from a distant village, and was generally conveyed by a rather small boy on a very big horse. This small boy was not at all afraid of the big horse, apparently,

but he was terribly afraid of the geese. I frankly confess I never had the pluck to meet these birds, and gave fullest sympathy to the diminutive John Gilpin who, frightened out of his wits, never dared to approach the gate that led into our domain and separated the farmhouse from the common.

But Meggie, who would generally be playing somewhere near at hand, would go straight out to the rescue. Taking perhaps her spade with which she had been digging, or picking up a stout stick from the ground, the little creature would run straight to the gate, open it, pass through it, and then go forth to switch the geese away. I always expected to see her attacked by the birds, but, as a matter of fact, instead they would turn and allow themselves to be driven aside in the most flustered fashion. And then Meggie would stand on guard until the butcher boy had been to the kitchen and returned with his empty basket. No amount of persuasion, or argument, could impress upon my little creature that what she did was likely to be dangerous for herself. She laughed at danger.

In those days we possessed a governess cart and a pretty little grey pony. And when "Daddy" came down from town, as he always did at the week-ends, sometimes bringing with him Victor Booth, a favourite pupil who was much loved by the children, Eva and Meggie would be at the top gate waiting to see the pony and cart arrive. And before my husband could stop the vehicle, or get out of it, Meggie would dart forward, catch hold of the pony's head, grasp the bit, and in triumph lead the cart down the rough path to the house.

Being very human little girls, they were now and then extremely naughty, especially Meggie. Eva was rather a dreamy child. She would be content to stay for a long while lost in thought, but Meggie was always up and doing, and generally was getting into mischief.

When nurse departed, someone else came on the scene, who was a governess, a nurse, and a maid combined. Margaret was not very young, and had travelled a good deal, and spoke various languages. She was Irish; that accounted probably for some very strange fancies

she had. For instance, I suppose few children had been more lavishly endowed with extraordinarily beautiful presents than mine were. Every pupil of my husband's had a gift for them at one time or another. They had a mass of toys and some beautiful dolls. But nothing of their better possessions had for them the fascination which belonged to one shabby, miserable specimen of a doll which they christened "Tommy." Where "Tommy" first came from I don't know! He, or she, once had possessed a wax face, but, having been held in too close proximity to a fire, had suffered terrible disfigurement, and the face had been almost obliterated. "Tommy" was simply worshipped by both children; they quarrelled about him daily; there were violent scenes; in fact, this very strange doll exercised a curious influence on their little lives. This gradually became so marked that I was at last warned by Margaret that unless "Tommy" disappeared, the consequences might be terrible! So one night, when both little creatures were fast asleep in their respective cots, their queer, much loved toy with the disfigured face was taken into the big

outer farm kitchen and solemnly burnt in the wide, open grate. I don't know to this day whether I was suspected of having had a hand in this execution, but I am afraid, perhaps, I was. At any rate, dismay fell upon the nursery, tears were shed in abundance, and for a time comfort could not even be suggested. But a day or so later a fresh doll was manufactured by Eva. She stole a green silk cushion from the modest drawing-room and tied a string round its middle ; a face was painted on the upper part, the cushion was christened " Rosie," and was carried about proudly, shared amicably by the little sisters when it was not installed in proud dignity in the despised mail-cart !

Rules and regulations were the order of the day as the months went by, and, as each spring came again, the little folks always returned to the farm. I remember one special occasion when there was great tribulation. Both children had been firmly refused permission to go to the marshes with the bailiff's children. These bailiff's children were much older, rather jolly, but not altogether responsible. Well,

while I was working and Margaret had gone to the village, Eva and Meggie disappeared. And it was not until quite late that they were brought back in a condition described by my one domestic as "a mask of mud." I am afraid the bailiff's children got some slaps and hard treatment. My two little people were undressed and washed, and Eva took her scolding very quietly, but Meggie protested. And when Meggie protested very forcibly, she had the power of making everybody around her inexpressibly wretched. I remember, when they were very small, Eva coming to me with a request one day :

"Mummy ! Oh ! Mummy dear, *please* don't let Baby cry no more. When she noises so it hurts me in my inside ! "

But argument and pleading were of no use with Meggie. All she would say to these was :

"If I want to 'owl, I'll 'owl ! "

And howl she did ! She wore us to threads on this particular occasion. It had been a hot day, and when at last she was put to bed, I undertook to sit in the room with her. In fact, I was a little anxious ; she was so exhausted.

Her breath was coming in sobbing fashion, with many sighs. I took hold of one of her little hands, and I brushed the hair from her brow, and I gave her repeated drinks of water, and gradually she grew calmer. And then, little morsel of humanity as she was—about, I suppose, three years and a half just then—she whispered to me a request to kiss her. I got up and bent over her, and her little arms came round my neck, and we kissed many times. And then she said in a very low voice :

“ Lovey dovey ”—this was a favourite name for me—“ I’m good now, but I’ve got somefink to say. It’s to God, and I want to say it to Him all by myself. You don’t mind, do you, Mummy? ”

That was a phrase of Meggie’s that ran all through the rest of her life—“ You don’t mind, do you, Mummy? ”

She said it to me only an hour or so before she died, when I was asked to persuade her to take something that would nourish her and she refused to take it.

Life in those early days was spent six months in London and six months at this old farmhouse

in Kent. They had various maids and attendants, and their very first lessons were given by a charming lady who lived in a neighbouring farmhouse, and to whom they quickly became very much attached.

Winter was always spent in London, and, being very attractive, and, I think I may venture to say so, very prettily mannered children, both Eva and Meggie were in great request for small entertainments. They also had a number of interesting friends. Meggie had a great admirer in Tosti, that amazing little genius and delightful comrade ; indeed, he loved both children, and was generally about when they were going for their walks in the Park. His studio was in Mandeville Place, where also our home was, and many a time I have seen Tosti standing outside his flat with a peppermint sweet in each hand waiting for the two little people to appear, who would then advance towards him with their mouths wide open, into which the sweets would be popped. At an early age they came in contact with well-known people. Caruso, for one (this was later, and proved a "thrilling" business).

Katherine Thurston was much taken with Eva, and Madame Careña fascinated both children. Then they were very fond of Dr. Michele Esposito, head of the Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. He was given the name of "Pat" because he spoke with a delicious brogue. My husband not only loved Esposito, he gave him the profound homage due to a fine musician. Another beloved friend of our home was the late Mr. Gustave Aguet, so well known in commercial circles; a "friend of friends," devoted to art. Incidentally Mr. Aguet was responsible for my husband coming to England. The young princesses of Connaught, who studied with my husband for eight years, were also much interested in my small folk. When Meggie was a wee baby she used to be brought down from the nursery at tea-time to be admired. The great excitement with Princess Daisy and Princess Patsy was to take off the lace cap she wore and examine her little bald head to see if any hair had arrived. She was born with a mop of soft curls, but they all rubbed off, and not one single hair could be found till she was well over six months old. In after days her wealth of hair

was a source of worry to her, and sometimes amusement, as, for instance, when she had to wear a pigtail in *The Charm School* (a fashion shared with all the other girls in the play). After the dress rehearsal, Clarkson's man went the round of the dressing-rooms to collect the plaits, and when he enquired for Miss Albanesi's pigtail he was sent about his business by Patty, who informed him that if he wanted to get "Miss Meggie's" plait he must come in and cut it off from the head where it belonged.

With a musician for a father and a writer for a mother, the children were brought in contact with many other writers and musicians, and with painters. My husband had a charming talent for sketching, and made many water-colour studies. He was deeply interested in modern paintings, and at one time had a very charming collection of pictures, oils, pastels, and water-colours, which, with his collection of blue and white china, represented years of delighted pursuit and possessive satisfaction. It is interesting to note in this connection that Oscar Ricciardi, a well-known Italian painter, was his brother-in-law, and an uncle of my husband

was at one time the leading miniaturist in Italy, while his son, Guiseppi Albanesi, does very beautiful work as a miniature painter. My husband had two brothers, one a doctor in Naples, and another who is a judge and lives in Milan.

Each person who came in contact with Meggie had apparently his or her own name for our younger child. She was known with some, for instance, as "Margot." I think it was poor Hugo Heinz, the well-known singer, who gave her this name (what a lovely voice he had! what a charming man! and what a sad end!!).

Her French governess naturally called her "Marguerite," just as her German governess named her "Gretchen." "Meggie" was our own pet name. She had such a string of names—Margherita, Cecilia (this was chosen by her godmother, Lady Euan-Smith) Brigida, (because she was born on St. Brigida's day), Lucia Maria. At her christening the poor priest got entangled in all these names! It was Mrs. Val Prinsep who stuck to "Baby" for Meggie even after she was launched on the stage. Val Prinsep

was one of my husband's oldest friends, and his wife and their three boys were devoted at one time to Albanesi.

Like all children, my two had a quaint way of making remarks and stating their opinions. I remember once, when Eva was a very little child, she had just arrived back from the Park with her nurse as I was going out. Standing on the step beside me, she slipped her hand in mine.

"Where you going, Mummy?" she queried.

"I am going out to lunch, darling."

She looked at me thoughtfully for a little spell, and then she said:

"Funny Mummy, always eating food in other people's houses."

Their great delight, too, like most little girl children, was to help me dress when I was dining out or going to a theatre. And I recall one occasion when Meggie adorned herself with such bits of jewellery as I possessed, and then paraded up and down in front of the long mirror. And then she turned to me and asked:

"When can I wear things like these, Mummy?"

I told her that she would have to wait a little while—until she was grown up. Immediately she began to question. Meggie was very thorough; she always wanted to know the reason why.

“What is being grown up?” she enquired.

I told her that I was grown up. She looked at me as she came back to the dressing-table and put down the odds and ends of things, and she regarded me gravely.

“That means you is an old Mummy, doesn’t it?”

I assented to this remark. Then she pursued the subject.

“Are you *very* old, Mummy?”

I thought it advisable to give an evasive reply, but she went on with her questioning.

“Are you the oldest woman on earth?”

And to this, fortunately, I was able to reply in the negative.

Once when she had recovered from a very sharp attack of illness—I believe it was after she had had measles—she was asked to stay up in Hampstead with some friends of ours—the kindest people in the world, but not blessed with

too many of this world's goods. Her hostess was going out shopping one morning, and before starting out she said to Meggie :

“ Well, little girl, I am going out shopping. What shall I bring you back for your dinner?”

Meggie looked at her—she always had a most fascinating way of looking gravely at people—and she pondered this, and then she said :

“ Oh, *please* don't bother ; anything will do for me. A chicken and a sole will be *just* what I'd like ! ”

On one occasion, when there had been some slight illness, I remember a milk diet was prescribed, and this was recommended in Meggie's presence.

The child looked at the doctor and gave a deep sigh.

“ I'm awful sorry,” she said, “ but I think I'd better tell you I am *not* a favourite with milk ! ”

I might say here, perhaps, that many of the little remarks of the children in my novel *The Glad Heart* were all taken from conversations I chanced to overhear, and had stored in my memory.

Both little girls were popular, and in great request at parties, because, though so young, they were always ready to help amuse other children. On more than one occasion they went to Clara Butt's home, when she gave parties for her young people, and I have seen Clara sit at the piano and sing and play softly for Eva and Meggie to dance. Here is a little bit out of a letter from Clara Butt :

“The memory of dear little Meggie and Eva at our children's parties is among my dearest and sweetest remembrances. The picture made by those two is unforgettable. The natural grace of movement produced a kind of enchantment for all who were privileged to see it. Dear little elves ! What happy hours with our baby ones dancing about us ! ”

I have another little vision of the children dancing. That was when Frederic Norton, in the days before he became so well known, would come to see us and would sit at the piano and play and sing for Meggie and Eva. There were



WHEN SHE WAS ELEVEN

two or three little songs of his which I recall—one in particular, “Oh, Mr. Moon,” which the children loved.

Both children were exquisite little dancers, though they never went to a dancing class. It was, I suppose, a natural expression of joy and pleasure to them—a racial expression, I fancy. Their greatest delight was when they could capture their father and make him sit at the piano, and then they would dance to his improvisations—Eva gracefully and dreamily, Meggie like a tornado, full of passion, and excitement, and drama, except when she would take it into her head to do a toe dance, and this, oddly enough, she could do quite easily, without any training, but helped largely, of course, by a pair of block-toed shoes which I had been persuaded to buy. The child's very first public performance was in a pastoral play written by Mrs. Adrian Hope and given at the Botanical Gardens. Meggie was Cupid, and Clarkson made a really lovely golden wig for her to wear. She was about five or six years old then. I can see her now running through the trees and the sunshine—such a pretty little creature. She spoke her speeches

charmingly, and as she walked about with her nurse between the two performances she was stopped frequently and her golden curls were much admired !

The sisters, differing as they did in temperament, were enough and to spare for their own entertainment, for they were both overloaded with imagination, and found no difficulty in surrounding themselves with any atmosphere they required for some new game. For instance, Meggie, following on a very ardent reading of some boys' adventure books, became obsessed with a love for the sea, and instituted the original idea that she and Eva would be the only two girls in the British Navy. The nursery, therefore, was transformed into a battleship, Eva would be ordered to the rigging (which was the little four-post bedstead in which she slept)—it was generally Meggie who commanded and Eva who obeyed, and she had to do innumerable other nautical duties. And then these two comical little figures would salute each other gravely, and would stand to attention as some imaginary admiral inspected on his imaginary quarterdeck.

This flight of fancy would sometimes hold the children enthralled for weeks. Even more prolonged than the Navy period was the time when dressed in dust-sheets, and with great religious fervour and piety, they held services in the servants' bathroom, for a time transformed and maintained as a chapel. I am afraid I cannot believe that this pious period had any marked effect on their general behaviour; in fact, I seem dimly to remember some rather violent scenes when Eva stood out against Meggie's determination to turn her into a nun.

Later on they became so carried away by an ardent devotion to the Royalist cause that I had to mount the stairs to end the battles, fought with walking sticks, against the little guests who had been temporarily cast for the parts of members of the Roundhead armies. They had a great love for all connected with the Stuarts, and equally so for the costume period (gendered, perhaps, by frequent visits to *Monsieur Beaucaire*), and a favourite book with them was *The Moon of Bath*, written by Beth Ellis. This story they used to read aloud over and over again to one another; its charms never palled.

Another game which thrilled them for a time was when they had ten imaginary dogs, and would go forth into the park armed with whips, and would call these ten dogs to heel by name and have great difficulty in keeping them in order. This game had to be stopped, however, because their maid objected. Her imagination could not keep pace with ten non-existent animals.

At a very early age Eva began to use her pencil. She would copy everything she saw, and in this she was encouraged by the various artists of our acquaintance. I have still some really exquisite reproductions of hers, in pen and ink, of some of Dulac's illustrations. And when she was very young she would begin to draw and paint menu cards, or make sacred little pages to slip into Meggie's prayer-book. Later on she took to portraits, and many were the protests uttered by her sister as she was pressed into constant service as a model. Incidentally I may say here that Meggie always shirked having her portrait painted. The late Ambrose McEvoy (who made various studies of Eva when she was working under him at the

Slade) was very anxious for Meggie to sit to him, but she always refused point blank ; in fact, I am afraid she was very rude.

They both of them, of course, had music lessons (for a short time with Lilius Mackinnen, a very brilliant pupil of Albanesi, who is so well known), but I think, of the two, music was more fully a part of Meggie's nature than it was of Eva's. I know we used to have occasional scenes with Eva at lessons, and later, when urged to practise, she would ask me very pertinent questions.

“ What's the use of scales ? Who invented scales ? What does anybody want with scales ? Oh, Mummy, aren't they the most *hopeless* things in the world ? ”

On the other hand, many a time I have found Meggie crouched up on the floor outside the drawing-room door listening while her father was playing inside. When he wanted to practise, it was a very clearly understood rule that nobody went into the room, so Meggie would sit outside, and the child would put her finger on her lip to all those who came and went, imposing silence. As a matter of fact, this love

of music worked in with her daily life as she grew out of childhood. Betty Chester has told me that many times when Meggie was studying a new part she would ask Betty to go to her, and then she would demand song after song. Also, whenever Betty went to see her in her dressing-room at the theatre, Meggie would plead to Betty to sing; she was particularly fond of some quaint old Elizabethan melodies.

I fancy she must have been about ten years old when she started to learn the violin with Mr. Rowsby Woof, that exquisite artist and fine teacher. I quote here some remarks that Mr. Woof has made to me about Meggie.

“ There are few things Meggie could not have done if she wished to. This is, of course, no news to you. She had a wonderful violin hand, and a graceful and promising bow, and showed much promise of temperament. She was also gifted with what we can only call ‘taste’ as regards things musical. I was rather doubtful at first about her ear, but this was

improving when her short career as an Academy student was cut short by illness. You may probably have forgotten that she taught herself some difficult Scriabine pieces for the piano. She came to play them to us at your suggestion. I told her then that, much as I disliked the idea of her giving up her violin as a principal study, it was obvious that nature intended her to be a pianist, and that I should be the last person to stand in her way if she wished to change her instrument. When first she began to be famous, I remember how oddly the familiar voice sounded to me. A musician's ear is unconsciously alert in such matters, and her voice hardly seemed to change its timbre when she became a woman. 'Do I play this in the third position?' or 'Shall I slur this?' were always said with that soft richness which was to charm the world only a very few years later. I had always a very warm corner in my heart for my little pupil, whom even now I like to think of as a child—just as she was when I first knew her in the happy days at Lancaster Gate."

When we decided to finish her career as a violinist, we had the intention of giving her a musical training, so just for a little while Meggie was sent to the Royal Academy of Music, and, unfortunately, went into her father's class. I use the word "unfortunately" advisedly, for I never think it a wise plan for a child to study with a father, more particularly when the child and the father are so amazingly alike in nature and character as Albanesi and Meggie were. This venture was not a success. Meggie was terribly overweighted; she felt that so much was expected of her because she was her father's daughter, and, being very slow to learn, not having the necessary equipment for grasping the difficulties, quickly or easily, the technicalities connected with the rudiments of musical education were beyond her powers. So she failed lamentably, and suffered terribly in realising this failure; for she longed always to give her father pleasure and satisfaction. Consequently it was decreed that she had better retire from a musical career, and some slight illness, coming opportunely at that time, helped the situation. She wept many bitter tears when alone with me

over this sorry finish to her work at the Royal Academy of Music.

In fact, the day on which it was determined that she would not return to the R.A.M. was, I should imagine, one of the unhappiest days in Meggie's little life. She retired upstairs to her room, and she could not be induced to come down even though "Daddy" administered sweetest comfort later on. Whenever things went wrong with her, Meggie always went upstairs and shut herself in her own little room. I remember so well one day when we had a small tea-party. I don't exactly know what upset Meggie on this particular afternoon, but she got into a great temper, and began to cry, then she ran upstairs and shut herself up in the nursery. Our guests included a few boys, and one after another these boys climbed up to the top of the house and knocked on the locked door, and tried to induce the child to come down. Marshall Curtis-Brown (who was always a favourite with her) almost succeeded in this great adventure, but even he had to come down rather ruefully after a time, carrying the cup of tea, and the biscuits and cake. And then Eva lost her

temper, and she ran upstairs as fast as her little legs would carry her, and she pummelled on the door fiercely. And when at last it was opened, she attacked her sister "for all she was worth." And Meggie sat hunched up on her bed and listened, and when Eva had come to the end of her speech she made one enquiry :

"Is Mummy downstairs?"

Eva said, "Of course Mummy is downstairs."

Then Meggie began to laugh.

"All right," she said. "If Mummy will give me half a crown, I'll stop crying."

I regret to say I fell weakly for this means of having peace in the household! It must not be supposed from this that Meggie was mercenary. She was a most generous little creature, and always spent her pocket-money on others.

But on the occasion of the day when she knew she had failed at the Royal Academy of Music, no gift of money could comfort her. It had to be a question of time. And in a little while, fortunately, a new interest came into her life.

All through her childhood, Meggie had shown a curious sense of drama. When they were very little, she and Eva would give performances in the drawing-room. I remember one afternoon my dear friend, Beryl Faber, coming by special request to attend one of these performances. It was Eva who wrote the play, printed and painted a programme, and designed the stage setting, but it was Meggie who acted. And it seems almost ridiculous to state in cold blood that there was such pathos in the acting that she brought tears to Beryl's eyes, and to mine. And afterwards, when we were having tea, the two children having gone up to the nursery enchanted with the success of their performance, she said to me quietly :

"My dear, that child is a born actress. It's there! No one can teach her what she has; it's in her nature, it's in her blood. Then her voice—that dear little pathetic, husky voice—it sends a thrill through one! I don't urge children and girls to go on the stage very often," Beryl had added, "but I do urge you to put Meggie into the groove where she will achieve great things."

The stage, however, did not come into the scheme of the child's life till much later. Neither girl went to boarding school ; instruction was given at first at a daily school near at hand, and then later, for religious instruction, at the Convent of our Lady of Sion. It was, as a matter of fact, rather difficult to have them trained together, because Eva was so extremely quick ; she could learn almost before the matter was expounded to her. Meggie, on the other hand, was a worker, a plodder. They had fencing, swimming, and riding, and though Meggie was never very good at games, she loved these lessons—especially riding.

I gave them French and German governesses, and Meggie was largely educated by her German governess, a very enlightened and gifted woman who adored her. Fräulein found Eva, of course, a quick and apt pupil, but Meggie was slow—very, very slow.

And after a little while Eva drifted into another groove ; she attended classes, and Meggie was left alone. The tuition she had received from her German governess was very helpful, and, although she ceased to speak the

language after 1914, she found, when she went to Sweden in 1922, that her knowledge of German was very helpful to her. It may seem odd that Italian was not spoken, nor were they trained in their father's language till much later.

Eva, of course, dashed into literature. She wrote poems, and plays, and at least one historical romance. Meggie's only effort as an authoress was when she was extremely young. It was a short story, written with immense enthusiasm, for a magazine edited by the Curtis-Brown children. The story was called "The Rersult of a Picnic," and it described the adventures of a young woman meeting a beautiful young man in a wood. The young man, it appeared, turned out to be a prince, and the result of the picnic was that the young lady, after this meeting with the prince, came out of the woods carrying a baby in her arms, saying to her friend, "Look what I have found, the prince gave it to me." She then announced that it was the first of the seventeen children promised her by her newly found friend! I have the manuscript of that little story hidden

away somewhere, and many a time later on has Meggie sat and laughed at her literary effort.

Probably it was the memory of what Beryl Faber had said to me that influenced me in a decision which had the most important effect on Meggie's future. When she ceased to attend the Royal Academy of Music, and her other lessons had come to a temporary end (it was in 1915, the second year of the war), and her German governess had disappeared, I resolved to put the child at the Academy of Dramatic Art. How well I remember the day she had to pass the entrance examination! She had been given the papers, and had studied them with that enthusiasm which was so largely a part of her, and had become so excited that she could not sleep or rest, and I took her myself to the Academy in Gower Street, where we made the acquaintance of Mr. C. M. Lowne, to whom Meggie later became very much attached. Another candidate was waiting in the outer room. Her name was Lumley—Molly Lumley. Her mother was Miss Florence Wood; her grandmother that wonderful comedienne, Mrs. John Wood. Mr. Lowne always declared that

the A Class in that term was one of the best the Academy had ever had.

There really was some very interesting work done by these young girls, among whom was Flora Le Breton, commonly called "Billie," who has made a big name in America for herself both as an actress and as a film star. And another very exceptionally gifted young creature was a girl called Gladys Lewis, whom Meggie always declared would have outshone everyone had she not gone abroad and then led a very wandering life. I recall one memorable afternoon at the Academy of Dramatic Art when Class A gave a performance of *Nobody's Daughter*. Gladys Lewis played Gerald du Maurier's part in the last act (there were no boy students at the Academy at that time), and Meggie played "Mrs. Frampton," and, grotesque as it may seem, the acting of these two young girls was extraordinary. Indeed, one completely forgot that "John Frampton" was impersonated by a girl, so magnificent was the pathos and outburst of emotion portrayed by Gladys Lewis.

I remember also Meggie giving, when she was

just sixteen, a really remarkable performance in one act of *Lady Frederick*. On another occasion she caused great laughter by her impersonation of the Frenchman in the last act of *Fanny's First Play*. One of her boy friends lent her the clothes, and she was really very, very funny. Flora Le Breton, I recall, startled everyone by her rendering of Autolycus, and later with, for a young girl, an amazing study of "Mrs. Candour" in *The School for Scandal*. As for Molly Lumley, she had all the dry and yet sparkling humour which characterised her celebrated grandmother.

It was a very happy time. Whenever I go to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, I remember those days, so full of business, and excitement, and ambition, such days of sunshine in young lives, and yet clouded every now and then inevitably by disappointment. For instance, Meggie wept most bitterly when she went up for the examination for a scholarship and failed to get it. But, except for an occasion such as this, I know the child was very, very happy working and studying. Everything she did, she did with all her heart and soul. She



MEGGIE AGED FOURTEEN

was having her voice placed and trained, and she would start very early in the morning with the exercises that she had to practise. One could hear her going through them so thoroughly—the enunciation, the breathing exercises, the swelling out of the voice, and the withdrawal of it until it was a whisper. And then there were the physical exercises, and the practice of doing a natural fall.

Meggie would bring back with her to the house at odd times some of the girls in her class, and they would give a performance for my benefit, which generally entailed one after the other showing me how to do an effective faint or fall on the stage.

I think it was quickly discerned at the Academy that there was good “stuff” in Meggie. At any rate, I know that her earnestness, her enthusiasm, her delight in her work, were almost infectious, and most of those who trained her took a great interest in her. The late Mr. A. E. George, for instance, with whom she studied Shakespearean scenes, spoke to me with very much appreciation about her, and predicted big things for her future.

DA

I know, too, that Miss Helen Haye and Miss Elsie Chester, with both of whom she studied, had the same appreciation. Miss Haye, with whom she acted later on in *The Skin Game*, did some very fine work in the Dramatic Academy, and in the production by her of *Hyperion* Meggie was given a part. Miles Malleson played the music for this performance, and I have been told that after he had heard Meggie's speech (a very long and difficult speech) he made enquiries about her, as he was anxious to know who the little girl was with the wonderful voice. I believe Miss Haye was very pleased with her.

It was modern plays like *Lady Frederick*, *Nobody's Daughter*, and such-like, that Meggie studied with Miss Chester, the mother of that very gifted and delightful young actress, Dorothy Holmes-Gore. I met Miss Chester not very long ago, and we spoke of Meggie. There were tears in her eyes, and tears in the sound of her voice, when she told me how much she had loved the child, and what a joy it was to work with her.

Although she failed to get a scholarship,

Meggie took a prize for fencing. And I remember, when Eva was at her daily classes at college, she was considered the best of those who marched round the big hall. She had a way of putting down her feet and carrying her head which was fine and attractive.

But neither of my girls were what would be called nowadays gifted in educational matters. I have always believed that there were immense capacities for achievement in Eva, although she always has lacked concentration—in which she was, I think, one apart in our little family, for both her father and myself have certainly concentrated on work, and undoubtedly her sister did. With Eva it was always a case of being immensely quick and apt at anything she undertook, but never sticking to any one interest, no matter how ambitiously she started. Perhaps this was because she was such a dreamer, and then because she was so uprooted from her dreams, and her steps were turned into paths which wandered far away from artistic things, and led to household cares, and drudgery, and sick nursing. I always regretted the destiny which separated the sisters, because they were of great

help to one another, and they needed one another so much.

It was the time when all young creatures were called upon to do their little bit in connection with the war, and Meggie began to be quickly in request at entertainments, especially at the Shakespeare Hut for recitations and taking part in little plays. She wanted, of course, to do more than this, but I had to put my foot down. She was working already very closely, and was not physically fit for the fatigue of canteens, or duties of that nature. Eva was working at the Slade School when Meggie went to the Academy of Dramatic Art, and we used to have some very happy meetings at lunch-time. And then Eva cut short her artistic career and went out as a V.A.D. She started at a canteen and eating-place down at the docks, and had to travel a weary journey to and fro in very hot weather, and then she passed through a long spell of work at a big *dépot* where all kinds of hospital requirements were made, and my girl rolled bandages, and ran errands, and made herself generally useful. Later on she took up the pantry work at the American Hospital in

Lancaster Gate, and worked there steadily for some months.

As a little child, Meggie had been, not merely healthy, but robust, sturdy ; in fact, when she was an infant, as I have already stated, most people thought she was a little boy. But as she grew older, and passed from a little child into a schoolgirl, I quickly realised that the spirit within her made tremendous demands on her physical strength, and that she needed very great care.

The first play they saw was a performance of *The Water Babies*, and I remember Meggie sat clutching my hand and trembling from head to foot, and every now and then she would whisper, "Is it going to stop? Oh! don't let it stop, Mummy." I kept them both away from such excitement for a time, but gradually they were taken to the theatre, and they loved nothing better. Eva went to see *Peter Pan* the first year it was produced, but she was too small to appreciate it ; in fact, she was frightened, and that night she had to sleep with me because she was afraid Peter was going to make her fly away!

Both had their respective stage "loves." From the time she was quite a little girl, Eva was an ardent worshipper of Lewis Waller. And Meggie poured out her tributes of homage and appreciation on Fred Terry. They both had innumerable postcard photographs of their favourites, and their great delight was to attend all performances possible in which these two actors appeared. It is very touching for me to realise that the adoration Meggie gave as a little girl to Mr. Terry grew in later years into a deeply affectionate friendship. In fact, this delightful actor spoke to me once about the child in a way I shall never be able to forget. And I may take this opportunity of saying that the experience Meggie had when she went on tour with Fred Terry and Julia Neilson in *Henry of Navarre* was the most splendid help to her. She owed a big debt of gratitude to Julia, who not only helped her professionally, but was such a magnificent moral influence, strengthening and stimulating a very highly strung, nervous girl.

This engagement with the Terrys came after Meggie's first professional engagement, and that first start followed on a public performance at

the Academy of Dramatic Art, when, as "Lady Teazle" in *The School for Scandal*, in 1917 (and she herself was seventeen!) Meggie took the Bancroft Gold Medal.

That was a very great day in Meggie's life. And, as happened so frequently in her future career, this day of excitement and achievement followed on a spell of serious illness, for, as ill luck would have it, Meggie, in the midst of her term's work, fell a victim to a very bad attack of chicken-pox. She was really very ill for a time. Our own doctor was away—he was in Italy with the British troops—and his place was taken by a very remarkable man, an Australian—a great, big, fine creature, rather abrupt in manner, and one whom, if I had been asked to give my opinion, I should immediately have said was the last person on earth to make an appeal to Meggie. On the contrary, she turned to him more than willingly, and I know now that the stand he took with her, the way he treated her, the strength of the man, his protective care, helped her through a very bad experience. Indeed, though I would not have said this to her, there was a time when I very

much feared that she never would be able to recover in time to appear at the public performance. Happily, thanks to doctor and nurses, we did get her well, though she was not very strong, and, of course, she was nervous and depressed. I did everything I could to keep up her spirit. I provided her with a lovely dress, and I myself did her hair ; it was, as I have stated elsewhere, very wonderful hair—there were masses of it. I would not let her wear a wig ; I kept her head very small (as Marie Lohr had worn it when she played “ Lady Teazle,” and how adorable she looked!), and then, when I had dressed the hair as closely as possible, I powdered it, and I may say that I do not think I ever saw a prettier little creature than Meggie was in her brocaded dress and her powdered hair. Later on, Lady Forbes Robertson told me that Meggie as “ Lady Teazle ” had made a great impression on her husband. Sir Johnston was one of the judges, Sir John Hare and Miss Irene Vanburgh the other two ; and dear Sir Squire Bancroft, who had known me as a child, wrote saying how glad he was that Meggie had got the medal. I was told also by

Sir Arthur Pinero that, apart from her undoubted talent, she had made a great impression by her beauty.

In a tribute I have received from Malcolm Watson, he writes: "Witnessing Meggie Albanesi's performance as 'Lady Teazle' in *The School for Scandal*, I at once realised that here was a young girl destined later to take a place in the all too limited number of England's leading actresses. Youthful as she then was, and with no experience of stage work, no one could be blind to the charm, the sensitiveness, the pathos and the emotional power manifest in her acting, qualities that time alone was wanted to develop and to strengthen to a still higher degree."

Her success as "Lady Teazle" is an old story now, but, as a little tribute to the sweetness and generosity of her fellow-students, I must relate that the child (having come away from the theatre not knowing whether she had done well or had failed) was rung up on the telephone by several of her class that evening and given the great news that she had been awarded the Bancroft Gold Medal.

The outcome of this success was that Meggie had the great good fortune to be engaged by Mr. Gerald du Maurier (as he was then) to appear at Wyndham's Theatre, which she did in September 1917, just six weeks before her eighteenth birthday. She was cast for the part of "Lucy" in *A Pair of Spectacles*.

In a letter I have received from Sir Gerald he says :

"I am always very proud to think that I gave Meggie her first job after she got the Gold Medal from the Academy, and to remember how sweet she was during the run of *A Pair of Spectacles*, which was one of the worst times." (Sir Gerald means it was the time of the bad air raids.) "I have another recollection of Meggie when I was crossing the Channel on a very rough day, and she was sitting looking wistful and alone, which was always my impression of her. I only wish I had known her better ! She was—what they say about an actress—in a class by herself."

Those were dreadful days—or, rather, nights—for us, those air raid nights. We never knew

any peace of mind until she was brought home. The effect of the air raids was disastrous to Sir John Hare's nervous system, and *A Pair of Spectacles* came to an end.

And then *Dear Brutus* was put into rehearsal, and there was no part for Meggie. She was given the understudy of "Margaret," the dream child, played by Faith Celli, and also of the part played by Doris Lytton. And perhaps it can be easily comprehensible to all those who have fullest sympathetic understanding with a very eager spirit (coupled with a burning desire to work and to make progress) to realise what Meggie suffered in the following months. It is true she played the part of "Joanna" on two occasions—once for a fortnight, when Miss Barbara Hoffe (who had followed on after Miss Lytton left the caste) was taken ill—and there was just one time when she played "Margaret." It was, of course, a very different reading from that which Faith Celli gave. There was nothing of the elfish boy-girl so dear to the heart of Sir James Barrie, but Meggie gave a very exquisite, wistful rendering which, while it did not approach Miss Celli's delightful performance, was not without a beauty of its own.

This engagement went through right up to July 1918. The war was still on, but everything was very uncertain. And when Julia Neilson approached me, and asked me if I thought we would care to let Meggie go with them to play the part of "Marie" in *Henry of Navarre* on tour, I at once took this offer to the management of Wyndham's Theatre and I was persuaded to fall in with Miss Neilson's suggestion. As Mr. T. B. Vaughan (Mr. du Maurier's manager) said to me: "Meggie will get experience; she will get help. She will learn how to act in various sized theatres, which is an excellent thing for her. And, as you know, Madame Albanesi, she frets very much at the monotony of being an understudy."

I may perhaps digress to say here that nothing more distressing can well be imagined for a young, ardent actor, or actress, than to be kept perpetually in the background, only dragged into the limelight at odd times, and then conscious that the audience resents the appearance of an unknown in the place of an established favourite. At the same time, considering her youth, that year of discipline was immensely valuable to

Meggie. I have just spoken about the very great benefit our girl received from her tour with Fred Terry and Julia Neilson. She was with them for four months, and, except that there was a certain amount of inevitable discomfort in those days for all touring companies, I know she enjoyed the experience. Not once, except on the two occasions when I went to be with her for a day or two, did Meggie fail to write a letter home, and when she could not fit in a letter she sent a telegram. Here is one of the little epistles she wrote to her father when I was with her :

“ *Birmingham,*

“ *October 8th, 1918.*

“ MY OWN DARLING DADDY,—Thank you ever so much for your dear telegram, which I have just got. How *I* wish you were with us too ! Mummy and I are ever so happy, but we would like our ‘ fierce one ’ [her own name for her father] with us. However, I shall soon be home again. I’m afraid you will be very lonely this week, but it is so dear of you to spare Mummy to me. It’s like a little bit of Heaven to have her, and I’m having

a wonderful birthday and lots of presents, and altogether I feel I'm the luckiest person alive! Now, Daddy, you must promise me to take care of your dear 'fierce' self!

"All my very dear love, from your own
"BABSY."

She came home at the end of this tour very tired and not very well, as she had been cutting a wisdom tooth and had had to have it extracted. Of course, she was eager to get more work, and did not want to go again on tour—at least, not immediately.

Her next chance came with a small part in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, when she played "Lise," and also was one of the nuns in the last act. The rehearsals for this production were, I believe, perhaps the most exhausting that any company could be called upon to endure. But Meggie never resented having to stay very late! It was all part and parcel of the glamour which still surrounded everything to do with the stage. And it was while she was acting in *Cyrano de Bergerac* that a chance came her way—a chance which brought her suddenly out of obscurity.

This chance was when Miss Edith Craig chose Meggie to play the part of "Sonia" in a performance of *The Rising Sun*, an adaptation from the Dutch by Christopher St. John, which was given by the Pioneer Society one Sunday afternoon at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. It was a part absolutely after Meggie's own heart—a love of a girl for her father (and no father was loved more deeply, more proudly, more sweetly, than my husband was loved by his children!). It was a tragedy, and it called for a display of emotional pathos which was so natural to Meggie. My husband and I sat together, and we held each other's hands while we watched that little creature of ours playing a part, and yet being so surely and truly herself. It was a wonderful performance, and Meggie was surrounded by fine actors—Leon Quartermaine, Violet Fairbrother, Felix Aylmer, Alfred Drayton, and others. And, as happened so often to her in her career, it was her fellow-actors who gave her the most spontaneous and splendid offering of homage. The audience, too, were quick to recognise that in this young girl there was a new element. There were nine curtains

at the end of the performance, and, after it was over, Meggie was taken to Ellen Terry, who was present, and to other important people, and was kissed and welcomed and congratulated. She was too dazed and broken ; her tears were too real, her feelings too acute, for her to grasp all that was passing round her. Her father and I went home alone, and her sister remained to bring her along.

The outcome of this performance was that Meggie was hailed by the Press unanimously as a young actress with a great future. I have all the cuttings, and they speak, most of them, of the " triumph " of Meggie Albanesi. It was her first big step forward, and she always loved to remember it and to speak about it. Also she cherished always a deep sense of gratitude for Edith Craig, who had given her her first big chance and had helped her so much to grasp that chance so fully.

In connection with this performance I quote some remarks made by Miss Christopher St. John. They run as follows :

" I well remember the Sunday afternoon in June at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith,



Camera Portrait by Hugh Cecil, 8 Grafton Street, London, W.

MEGGIE WHEN SHE WAS SIXTEEN

when Meggie Albanesi played 'Sonia' in Heijeerman's moving drama, *The Rising Sun*. Here was one of those difficult rôles in which an actress has to play a part of a high-spirited young girl in the early acts, and later to show the same girl a victim of remorse and terror. Meggie Albanesi played this part with an emotion so touching in its sincerity that a somewhat sophisticated audience wept. . . . Meggie Albanesi persuades us that actresses are born, not made."

At the time Meggie appeared in *The Rising Sun* she was rehearsing for the production of *St. George and the Dragons* at the Kingsway, where she played "a flapper" and showed that she had a great deal of comedy in her. Clemence Dane told me later on that it was Meggie's performance in this play which inspired her to insist on having her for the part of "Sydney Fairfield" in *A Bill of Divorcement*.

I think Meggie enjoyed acting at the Kingsway, but the play was not a success. And then there followed a few weeks in which she was restless, and nervous, and very eager to get

something more to do. That something came along in due course. She was cast for the small part of "Alexandra" in *Reparation*, with Henry Ainley. The piece was taken out on tour for some weeks, and then it was produced at the St. James's. Meggie had a very small part—in fact, a part which really had very little to do with the action of the play. But she had one small chance—a scene alone with Mr. Ainley in a garret—and I have had it said to me many times that, brief as that scene was, it stood out, revealing once again the latent powers for pathos and power, and the human touch which characterised most of the work my girl did. Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, who wrote so beautifully about Meggie in *The Sphere*, may be quoted here :

"Meggie Albanesi was a rare artist. She had the quality of temperament not lightly to be found on the English stage, though her short and brilliant career had but tested the promise of her powers. That fragile, passion-swept figure had a capacity for tragedy which, faintly revealed as yet, should have carried

her far beyond the bounds of easy comedy and social drama. I always felt she had a touch of that intangible thing we call genius. I recall her in Tolstoi's *Reparation*. She had but a small part, relatively speaking—that of the young sister-in-law who understands and sympathises with the profligate husband—but in her hands it became the pivot of the play, the actual manifestation of the author's meaning."

Of course, Meggie had ceased to belong to the Academy. There was really very little time for her to pursue other studies, because she played in various outside performances—in Herbert Trench's play, *Napoleon*, for instance, and in *The Reprobate*, and one or two other shows given by the Stage Society and others.

It may be interesting here to set down that when Herbert Trench was manager at the Haymarket, and was just about to produce *The Blue Bird*, he and Mrs. Desmond Deane (now Lady Vaughan) were both eager for Meggie to play the part of "Tyt-tyl." But she was only eight years old then, and her father would not hear of such a thing.

She was changing in herself in the days when she was at the St. James's Theatre. We lived in the Lancaster Gate neighbourhood, and it was very clear to me that, much as she loved us—and she did indeed love us—there was a spirit of restlessness in her. She declared that the house was too far away, and though, through Lady Randolph Churchill's kindness, she was made a member of the Ladies' Athenæum Club, then in Dover Street, she was imbued with the spirit which actuates so many girls these times—a desire to be free from home ties, an almost unconscious feeling of resentment that, being already a little personage, she was still obliged to be subject to parental supervision. Outside influences, too, had a great deal to do with this. The stage has a glamour and a great charm, but it has other less desirable attributes.

Meggie was very young. She had come into the full glare of public life when she was little more than a child. She was essentially an artist. She had all her father's love of beauty, sense of music. Life could be a poem to both of them in certain conditions, but they were also both of them Latin in temperament—which

means that, though they could have great spells of happiness and gaiety, they also were overshadowed by that curious morbidity which belongs to the Italian race, at least the artistic, intelligent Italians. And Meggie would fall into strange moods. There would be days when she would not speak to anyone, and yet I knew that she was not glad to hold herself aloof, and suffered in so doing. She was a great anxiety to me in those days.

Though I realised so well she wanted to go away, to be independent, to cut herself adrift from all home restrictions, her father was not in sympathy with her wishes. It was my task to make the home life as pleasant for her as I possibly could, and there came a spell, after a while, in which she seemed to drift back to us and to be content. We had turned the upper part of our house into a delightful flat for her. She had her own money (she was beginning to earn a moderately good salary), and she could come and go as she liked. But beneath the surface I knew the spirit of unrest, the desire for liberty, were always working.

Just now I have spoken of outside influences.

I fancy it is a common experience with all those who attain success, either artistic or professional (and who probably possess a strong magnetic personality), to attract the attention of a certain class of individuals who are exceedingly foolish and can be in a sense dangerous. These people, who never try to curb their infatuation, find means to intrude into the most intimate part of the lives of those whom they honour with their attentions ; even actually challenging, as it were, the right of others who, by the closest of human ties, have given love and devotion through all circumstances, and are the natural protectors and counsellors. In fact, I might go farther and say that these strange and unworthy individuals would, in fact, build up barriers which are difficult to set aside.

This is an intangible, and yet paradoxically a sufficient definite, evil, but it seems, as I have just remarked, to be the inevitable part of the life of those who have made for themselves a place a little apart from the rest of the world. It requires a great deal of philosophy and a great deal of self-control to support the sometimes humiliating and often very hurtful positions

which are forced on a wife, a mother, a sister, but where there is deep and loyal love there is always strength.

Every human being has his or her share of weaknesses, mistakes, and wrongdoing. I certainly have had more than my full share of these, for being in a very humble way an artist myself, and having made the natures and characters of those precious to me a study year after year, I have been at times very jealous and terribly unhappy. But, just because I have known the real goodness, the honour, the splendid qualities, which have lain in the hearts of those dear to me, I have lived through my difficulties, and so have been given proof that the flattery, the blandishment, and the effrontery of outsiders have not been able to reach or harm that faith in one another which is the foundation of all understanding sympathy and love.

Returning to the question of Meggie's desire to live apart from us, in justice to the child it must be conceded that the difficulty of the home question lay very much in the fact that Meggie's work and her father's were so widely different they could never mingle. My husband was out

of the house before nine every morning, and his day ended actually when Meggie's began. He was a great worker, and teaching is a most exacting profession, especially to a sensitive artist such as Albanesi was. His life, therefore, had to run on very regular lines, and, as most people know, a theatrical career means inevitably late hours, and cannot be ruled and regulated very easily.

After she left *Reparation* my girl went into *Mr. Todd's Experiment* at the Queen's Theatre, and that was the beginning of her connection with her dresser Patty—a most devoted friend, who really was a kind of second mother to Meggie in her stage life. Her work in *Mr. Todd's Experiment* met with renewed approval and appreciation.

I quote here from the article written by Mr. W. A. Darlington in the *Daily Telegraph*:

“To every part that she [Meggie Albanesi] played she brought the same power of imparting to a character, by the mere strength of conviction with which she played it, an inward glow of life. It seemed impossible to

disbelieve in the least life-like character when Meggie Albanesi played it, so vitally did she impress her own vitality upon it. Force of personality shone out of her eyes and showed itself in every line of her small, dark, expressive face. I felt it when I first saw her in *Mr. Todd's Experiment*. She had only one short scene to play, and she did hardly more than flash into view and be gone, but there was in that fleeting glimpse something that set me groping and peering in the darkness to find her name in the programme."

In an early part of this article, Mr. Darlington wrote :

" There are some people in whom life seems to glow with so intense and concentrated a flame that we cannot imagine them dead, their flame quenched, and of these Meggie Albanesi was one. Among our youngest generation of actresses she stood alone. This one might be found attractive, that one promising, a third clever, a fourth beautiful ; but when the real question rose, which, if any, of these

young players might confidently be expected to develop into the great actresses of the future, the only name that seemed to have any insistent claim was that of Meggie Albanesi."

It was while she was acting at the Queen's that she received a letter from Mr. Basil Dean asking her to go to see him. There had been, I know, an occasion, earlier, on which Meggie had seen Mr. Dean, and the interview had not been extremely pleasant. In the article he wrote about her just after her death, Basil Dean alluded to this: "Our acquaintance began in open hostility. I thought her conceited," he stated, "and said so. She thought me too managerial and unapproachable: I suppose I was. It was all very foolish, and the interview terminated abruptly. We often laughed together over it afterwards. I did not realise until later how much gentleness, and doubt, and self-depreciation were concealed behind her abrupt manner."

The outcome of this interview was that she was offered the part of "Jill" in *The*

Skin Game, that wonderfully human and yet cynically true portrayal of life by John Galsworthy. The success of *The Skin Game* was productive of much satisfaction and happiness to Meggie. She loved the play and her part. She was surrounded by people who were fond of her, and she played this part for very nearly a year. During the run of the play she also took the part of "Jill" in the film version of *The Skin Game*—a very admirable production. But, with what I think was a very natural feeling, Meggie began to be restless, and to resent the monotony of playing always the same part. Naturally, from the box office point of view these long runs are everything that can be desired, but from the point of view of a very young actor, or actress, surely they are very stultifying? It must be practically impossible not to get into a certain groove of thought and expression, and to develop mannerisms.

It was, therefore, with a great sense of relief at having received an offer to play in *The Charm School* that Meggie obtained permission from her management to transfer her services for

a time to the Comedy Theatre. She thoroughly enjoyed her part in *The Charm School*, in which she played a schoolgirl.

Once again I quote Mr. W. A. Darlington :

“ The part was that of a love-sick school-girl, and, badly played, might easily have become ridiculous, but Meggie Albanesi took the absurd creature and turned her into a human being who mattered intensely not less to us than to herself—and that was a piece of sheer acting-magic.”

While at the Comedy, rehearsals were just starting for the new play at the St. Martin's—a play by Clemence Dane ; and the script of her part had just been sent to Meggie when she was taken violently ill with a very bad form of influenza. Once again the child was faced with the probability of not being able to grasp a big chance ! The form of influenza which had attacked her partook of the nature of malaria, which will be understood when I say that her temperature for two days hovered between 105 and 107 degrees, and, therefore, when it

dropped was followed by a spell of utter prostration and exhaustion. This attack was a very serious matter for little Meggie, for it was the forerunner—indeed, I may say it was the actual cause—of all the illness, and trouble, and suffering which were destined to come to her in the next three years. I was warned then by her doctors that to let her get up before a certain time had elapsed was simply to invite trouble. Consequently the rehearsals for *A Bill of Divorcement* in the scenes in which she was concerned (and her part ran practically throughout the play) took place in Meggie's bedroom. She had, with our sanction and our help, separated from us by then, and had at last satisfied her ambition for independence by having a flat all to herself, and here it was that the rehearsals took place. She used to be very worn out when everybody had gone away, and then her nurse and I used to stop the telephone from ringing, because she really was not in a condition to be given fresh instructions (as was often the case) from the author and the producer, who did not always see eye to eye.

Of course, the suggestion of postponing the production was mooted, but it was shown that it would be a very costly and inconvenient business if the play could not be produced before Easter. The original date was March 12th, 1921, and the only postponement possible was to produce the play on Monday, March 14th. I shall never forget helping to get Meggie dressed to go to the theatre on the Friday, March 11th. She had her nurse with her, and was so weak she could hardly stand. But of course she was not going to fail! Alas! as one of her doctors said to me after she had gone, "Courage is a magnificent quality, but if only Meggie had not been so brave one might have done so much more for her!"

She stayed at the theatre that day only a few hours, and then she was brought back and put to bed. But the next day she went to a dress rehearsal with her nurse, and on the Sunday to the final dress rehearsal, and on the Monday—the night of the production—she had both her doctor and her nurse with her in the theatre.

It is not necessary for me to speak of that

wonderful first night of *A Bill of Divorcement*—an extraordinary play, a new dramatist, wonderful acting, a moving, human, heart-rending play. And, although I was her mother, I must give homage to a most exquisite, amazing revelation from our child of what the art of acting can be. The reception of the play was magnificent. Indeed, I should imagine there have been very few first nights so full of genuine enthusiasm, I might almost say ecstasy, as the first night of *A Bill of Divorcement*. Time after time the several members of the company were called, the principals came forward to get their share of the acclamation; the author made a speech, and was called again and again; the producer, too, had to appear twice; and still the shouting and the applause went on. And then Eva, who was standing just in front of me, turned round in a state of great excitement, and exclaimed:

“Listen, Mummy! Listen! They’re calling for Meggie!”

And there it was, clear and strong and emphatic:

“We want Meggie! We want Meggie! We want Meggie!”

My husband and I just held on to one another ! Our joy and excitement were almost too much for us. We quite expected to see the child in a state of collapse, for she was still so physically weak, but as she was led forward by Mr. Dean to face that throng of cheering, excited people, she was almost calm. She made a little curtsy, and her face was full of smiles. It was afterwards that she collapsed, and needed both the ministrations of her doctor and her nurse.

I shall put here just one or two of the letters which she received touching her performance of " Sydney Fairfield " in *A Bill of Divorcement*, and I will start with one from Sir James Barrie. He did not see the play until it had been running for some weeks, and this is what he wrote :

" DEAR MISS ALBANESI,—I saw Miss Dane's play last night, and felt mighty proud of our new dramatist. A very fine piece of work it is; with unusually admirable performances. But this is a line of homage to you for acting that is so fresh and poignant that my heart leapt for joy in it. I sat waiting for you to go wrong somewhere, but you never did.



IN "REPARATION"

Very seldom have I thought so well of a young actress as I do of you to-day. I have half a mind to address this letter to Madame Albanesi as a fellow-writer. What fun for her to have you ! Yours sincerely,

“ J. M. BARRIE.”

John Galsworthy writes :

“ DEAR MEGGIE ALBANESI,—I was at *A Bill of Divorcement* last night, and cannot refrain from sending you a line to say how delighted I was by your playing. It had wonderful moments. The end was a most extraordinary realisation of a terribly poignant scene. You got it from the inside. I want to say this to you, not that I suppose it is necessary, but because you are at the beginning of things : never let up on taking your art seriously. Don't be led into cheap stuff. You have a great gift, and we want the utmost we can get from you on the English stage.

“ With every good wish and sincere appreciation,

“ Yours sincerely,

“ JOHN GALSWORTHY.”

I pick out at random from the mass of letters which she received—all of which have not come into my hands—one or two others. From Cathleen Nesbitt :

“ MEGGIE DEAR,—I feel like the lady in the play—I want to give ‘ humble and hearty thanks ’ when I see anything so beautiful and surely right as your performance last night ! I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart on a very, very perfect piece of work. It did me good to see it. Bless you.”

From Aylmer Maude :

“ DEAR MISS MEGGIE ALBANESI,—It is seldom I see a play twice, but after seeing *A Bill of Divorcement* for a second time, I must write to say that in this I think your acting is perfect, better even than in *The Skin Game* and in *Reparation*, both of which I have seen. The play is very good, the acting all round is very good, and your part and performance are the best of all. Everyone to whom I speak about it agrees that this is so, and I shall watch your further career with warm interest.

“ Yours sincerely.”

Quotation from an article by Hubert Griffith in the *Observer*, December 16th, 1923 :

“ In Clemence Dane’s *Bill of Divorcement*, Meggie Albanesi had a finely conceived part, and reserved her emotion for two big moments in it—when she is steadying her father on the verge of hysteria and madness, and when she is comforting him with ‘ Not hard, father . . . not hard.’ In these two passages she gives one what, for lack of any better term, one can call the thrill. She made one cry ! And if the question is asked, Does one go to the theatre to cry ? I can only reply that I do.”

From the *Manchester Guardian* :

“ Recollection dwells upon the clear-cut intellectualism of her acting as ‘ Sydney ’ in *A Bill of Divorcement*. A performance perfect in its delicate and strained appeal to reason and compassion.”

Referring once again to what Malcolm Watson wrote about her, I give here an extract from the tribute he sent me :

“As ‘Sydney Fairfield’ in Clemence Dane’s remarkable play *A Bill of Divorcement*, Meggie gave a performance of such emotional stress as to hold the spectators spellbound by its sense of tragic reality. The marvel was that so young an actress should have understood, and been able to give such vivid impression to feelings so profound and far-reaching. If, I said to myself as I watched her, she can achieve such striking results at her age, what may not she be capable of accomplishing in the years to come when greater knowledge of the world has revealed to her some of the profounder mysteries of human existence?

“Here it is fitting I should break off. That I cannot do, however, without paying tribute to Meggie as she was in private, ever kind, generous, considerate and loyal to her friends and companions, who confidently looked to the future still further to enhance her already high reputation. But, *dis aliter visum*. And now, in Christopher Marlowe’s touching lines, we can only deplore that

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burnèd is Apollo’s laurel bough.”

From the *Queen*, December 20th, 1923 :

“ As the high water mark of her achievement I should vote for her ‘ Sydney Fairfield ’ in *A Bill of Divorcement*. A more poignant study of selflessness has seldom been seen upon the English stage, and, finely concentrated as was the character, it is not too much to say that the acting of Meggie Albanesi raised it to a yet higher level. Few who were privileged to see the play will soon forget that last despairing outcry—‘ Father, don’t believe her ! I am not hard, I am not hard ! ’ ”

From the *Referee*, December 16th, 1923 :

“ On the stage Meggie was probably the best instance of our time of a natural actress. No such performance as her ‘ Sydney ’ in *A Bill of Divorcement* could have been achieved by technique alone. No academy could have taught so wistful and so direct a personality of a young modern girl faced with a sentence of a lifetime tragedy. That was Meggie, the gay Meggie ; a rippling sense of

humour, and a tender heart, with a generosity often unknown in one so young, and the aura of tragedy which always seemed to her best friends to surround her."

It had been suggested before the production of *A Bill of Divorcement* that Meggie should play for a week and then take a holiday, but nothing would induce the child to leave her work, and she continued to play "Sydney Fairfield" throughout the long run of *A Bill of Divorcement*. Many a time she has told me that never again would she have such a splendid part. Undoubtedly, remarkable opportunities were offered to a young actress to "make good" in such a character as "Sydney Fairfield." But the play altogether was a very wonderful piece of work. I do not know how many times I saw it, but each time it affected me just as much as though I were seeing it for the first time. It was a part which called to every phase of temperament possessed by Meggie. She has told me herself that in the last act, after she had sent her mother away and was alone on the stage looking out of the window, and the light

gradually changed from sunset to a grey winter evening, and the sound of the departing motor car could be clearly heard, she felt she was actually the girl she was portraying ; that she had just parted from everything that was sweet and good in life, and was left to face a very terrible future. Even after she had played this part for nearly a year, when the curtain came down on the last act it was never possible for Meggie to speak to anyone. Patty mounted guard in the passage outside her dressing-room, and for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes she would never let anyone go in. I never attempted to approach Meggie until she had had time to recover and feel she could face the world again.

I quote again from the article by Mrs. Cecil Chesterton :

“ Meggie Albanesi had a genius for absorbing the essentials of a part. Her success in *A Bill of Divorcement*, as in *The Lilies of the Field*, lay in her immediate surrender to the dramatist's conception. But there were greater possibilities under that swift talent.

In her performance of 'Wanda,' the Polish derelict, in *The First and the Last*, there was that atmosphere of an emotional force which at any moment may become dynamic. The tense, quiet face, the haunted eyes, the tragic immobility of the husky voice, showed a sensibility which should have ripened into great art."

Very soon after *A Bill of Divorcement* was produced, Meggie was rehearsing to appear in a series of matinées given at the Aldwych Theatre. She was given the part of "Wanda," a Polish refugee, in John Galsworthy's dramatisation of one of his stories, called *The First and the Last*. These matinées did not run for very long, but Meggie's appearance in this small tragedy—for that is what it was—marked a step higher up.

I have heard several people say that her performance as this hapless little creature was one of the most beautiful she ever gave. She certainly made one's heart ache. She was a veritable little creature of sorrow, and the part appealed to her immensely. Below

is what the author wrote to her (May 30th, 1921) :

“ MY DEAR MEGGIE,—I feel I did not half express to you my delight and deep satisfaction in your playing of Wanda. I have been more touched and moved by your playing of this part than I ever remember to have been in the theatre.

“ I hope the critics may do you justice, but, if they don't, you may rest assured all the same that you go right to the heart and in technique reach an astonishing pitch of excellence.

“ Bless you for giving me such pleasure.

“ Very sincerely yours,

“ JOHN GALSWORTHY.”

When it was arranged for *A Bill of Divorcement* to be filmed, most people expected that Meggie would be approached to play the part of “ Sydney Fairfield,” but instead the producers brought over from America a musical comedy actress who was not exactly an ideal exponent of such a dramatic, and even tragic, part. And when I saw the film I must confess

I could not recognise it as being even related to the play. I suppose in due course films will pass into artistic and literary hands, but that desirable result seems still a long way off.

As a matter of fact, Meggie was not at all keen to act for the films, and always told me that she thought that she was "no earthly" on the screen. It must, indeed, be very difficult for any emotional actress to have to respond immediately to the call of the producer, and give an outburst of dramatic intensity without any help of any kind working up to a climax.

I think the film she really enjoyed doing was when she acted the little Chinese maid in *Mr. Wu* with Matheson Lang. It was a delightful kind of holiday. The scenes were set in a very beautiful garden—I think belonging to Sir Arthur Paget at Kingston. The company was a delightful one, and Meggie confessed to me that she had lost her heart to "her father" in the picture. Since certain scenes could be introduced in the film which were not possible on the stage—scenes which passed between "Mr. Wu" and his child—there was given scope for pathetic and emotional acting, and

I must confess I shed many tears when I saw these touching pictures played by Mr. Matheson Lang and Meggie. Perhaps she did not look very Chinese, but her appearance was very sweet. I have some beautiful "still" photographs of her in this character, which, unlike the majority of her photographs, gave pleasure and satisfaction to her father and myself. She used to come back from these days of film-acting with her arms full of lovely flowers. I expect that it is much more agreeable to play in the open air than in the confines of a studio.

After *Mr. Wu* she took part in one or two other films, notably *A Great Day*, in which she played a vamp, and also had to do a dance in a pastoral scene. This was the screen version of a play called *A Great Day*, which ran, I believe, at Drury Lane, and Arthur Bouchier played in it. Although she made up very cleverly for the part, and wore long earrings, and carried a little Pekingese dog about, and gave herself the airs and graces of a hardened woman of the world, Meggie looked ridiculously young for the kind of adventuress she was supposed to be. I think this film was not

regarded as a great success. I saw it at the trade show, but I was not struck dumb with admiration. I go to the films frequently, because they are a great relaxation, especially when I am working very closely, which I might say here is practically an everyday event.

And there is a certain type of picture which appeals to me largely, because one is transported absolutely to another part of the world : I mean the cowboy stories, with their deeds of courage, and their marvellous horsemanship, and the wide, open spaces of the country. The sense of atmosphere and of distance, the rough and ready life suggested in such pictures, is a big and a welcome change from one's ordinary life.

Meggie and I used to go together to the pictures very often, and she would sit with her hand through my arm, and cuddle my hand, and smoke the inevitable cigarettes. But, as I have just said, she was not very much inclined towards acting on the film herself.

It was while she was in *Loyalties* that a certain well-known American film producer, carried away by the fact that she could shed

tears easily, was determined to have her in a picture which he was just about to produce. Permission was given to Meggie to take this small part, and she went to the studio in Islington, going through the usual nervous strain of having to sit, and wait, and wait. Finally she was summoned to play her part, and the producer had his cameras all ready for a big "close up" of Meggie with tears running down her cheeks.

Then, as she told me afterwards, she went through a veritable agony, for not one single tear would come! Over and over again she had to go forward for the "close up," only to be dismissed once more. Then the producer lost his temper, and he "went for" Meggie, so I am told, and he said to her:

"I only engaged you because you could shed real tears on the stage, and now you can't shed a tear! You are no use to me!"

Then, strained to a nervous degree beyond description, the child began to cry, and she cried, and she cried, and cried, and they could not stop her! And then they got alarmed, but they managed to get their "close up" before they

took measures to restore the young actress to something like a state of calm.

That experience almost persuaded Meggie that she would never do screen work again. But then there came a most flattering offer from Sweden to take part in a picture to be produced by Victor Seastrom, in which he himself was going to act. Having obtained permission to accept this film work in early June 1922, Meggie sailed for Stockholm with the devoted Patty in close attendance. Her departure was not a very happy one—at least not at the beginning—because when we arrived at King's Cross Station it was to find that the train would not start for an hour, or an hour and a half, and, as we had left very early, without proper breakfasts, there was a general feeling of dismay. Her father was there, and Eva, and I, and many other friends, but not one of us could do anything with Meggie! She shut herself up in one of the big waiting-rooms, and there she sat like grief on a monument until, as luck would have it, Leslie Henson arrived to swell the number of friends assembled to wish her good-bye. The moment he heard

what had happened, this delightful actor looked at me, looked at Eva, winked at us both, and then marched straight into the waiting-room, and, clutching Meggie by the arm, he said :

“Come right on ! I’ve had no breakfast, and I am dying for food.”

Then he conducted her out of the station and into the hotel. A little later on, when she came on to the platform, she was all smiles and happiness, and it was I who shed tears because I was parting from my “baby,” despite the fact that everyone round the carriage in which Meggie sat was in roars of laughter. I don’t believe Leslie Henson ever had a more enthusiastic audience.

Her stay in Sweden was a great success. She loved the country, and the people took her to their hearts. She had a most enjoyable five weeks, and made great friendships.

Part of a letter written to me from Sweden by Signa Magnus ; it is dated December 12th, 1923 :

“DEAREST MRS. ALBANESI,—Really I do not know what to say ! I am simply paralysed and dumb with pain ! And what then about

you, dear, sweet, lovely little Meggie's mother? Please, dear Mrs. Albanesi, do accept my *deepest* regrets. I cannot express myself the way I feel, but you will understand, won't you?

"You know, dear Mrs. Albanesi, we, her friends up here in the North, loved her immensely; in that short time that she spent here she found a number of admiring and loving friends, and when we Swedes *love* someone we *never* forget them. Therefore I know that her death is going to leave great pain. Already poor —— is desperate and broken hearted. You remember that day I met you at her apartment? Well, Meggie and I had just made a certain agreement that we were to meet in Sweden the next year, and she was so happy to know that she was not to stay in a hotel this time, but in my little home as my very dear friend."

The Swedish film in which Meggie was given the part of the heroine was called *Honour*, but it was not released until after her death.

I don't think I have ever seen my girl look



Photograph by Florence Vandonon, London

AS "WANDA" IN THE PLAY BY JOHN GALSWORTHY
"THE FIRST AND THE LAST"

better than she looked on her return from Sweden, because all through 1921, and up to the time she went away—June 1922—she really had not been in good health. She had never recovered from the effects of influenza; it attacked her intestinally, not on the chest or lungs, and she really ought to have had a spell of complete rest before starting in on such an exciting and arduous part as that which she played in *A Bill of Divorcement*.

Meggie was, however, a very difficult young person to advise or help where her health was concerned. After all, she was little more than a child, and playing eight times a week a very emotional and morbid part, she herself has said to me, by way of excusing and explaining her actions, that she really felt that if she did not go out after the performance at night, and dance, and mix with young and jolly people, she would have developed a form of melancholia. Consequently she had many late nights, and never had the proper amount of rest, and never was fed in the way she should have been fed, because she had some extraordinary idea that she would grow very fat if she ate properly.

She smoked far too much and lived altogether on her nerves, with the result that there were times when she really was very ill. But she never let any indisposition stand between her and her work. She was a grand worker—an enthusiast with an amazing sense of duty. No matter how late she might have been the night before, if a rehearsal should be called for at an early hour, Meggie would be up and there, probably before anyone else had arrived.

I quote again Basil Dean here :

“ Meggie was usually first at rehearsal and always the last to leave. Sometimes she had almost to be driven away.”

All this devotion to her work, however, entailed a great strain on her already fragile body.

My share of the child's life at this period was one fraught with enormous difficulty. I have already alluded to this in another part of the book. Standing apart, and seeing so much which naturally caused me immense anxiety, and yet feeling powerless to come forward and exert authority (for intuitively I felt that if I were to press common sense, and wisdom, and

prudence too frequently, I should run the risk of causing a breach between us), I cannot say, looking back, that, immensely proud as I was of Meggie's work and success, I was altogether happy at that time. In fact, I fretted about her considerably. All mothers—that is to say, old-fashioned mothers—in this age, it seems to me, have to go through times of doubt, perplexity, anxiety, and dread about their girls.

The difficulty with Meggie was, as I have already explained, that she was not only a personality, but a personage. She was Meggie Albanesi, sought after, surrounded, flattered, admired, and almost inevitably drawn into contact with influences which were not always conducive to her good. She was certainly a curious mixture. As a little child she had always been so proud ; she had had a personal pride, and she had been extraordinarily wise. She had the capacity for concentration of thought, and very rarely acted on impulse, in which she was very different from her sister.

Gertrude Kingston, in the article that she wrote about her after her death, I think went more surely to the truth in some respects about

her than any other person. She saw in Meggie the expression of the nationality of the child's father. In fact, they were very much alike in many ways. Meggie was essentially Italian. Despite the fact that she was a girl and he was a man, they had the same quick judgment, one might almost call it shrewdness, the same strong sense of duty, and, although her determined separation from us might seem contradictory to this, there was in Meggie, as strongly as in her father, the love of home, and a reverence for those simple and real things in life which belong to home. The psychology of the Italian man is in itself a complex study. Naturally there were depths and drifts in her father which were lacking in Meggie, but I know that he always realised how like she was to him, whereas Eva has always resembled me, at least in certain essentials.

It was just this complexity in Meggie and in her father which to a certain extent might, and did, prove misleading. I think it can be safely asserted here that only one who has lived very, very closely day after day with an Italian *can* grasp the many different sides of a Latin nature,

especially an Anglicised Italian. In my opinion both Meggie and her father were two of the most honourable people I have ever met, but they were strangely lacking in discrimination in connection with certain associations which crept now and then into their lives. One can fight an enemy openly, but it is awfully difficult to fight elements of deceit, and underhand doings, and subtlety.

Over and over again my husband has said to me (and he said it to our dear friend Nettie White only a few weeks before he died) that there was only one person in the world who knew and understood him as he really was, and that person was myself. And he had added he thought it probable that I knew him better than he knew himself! I believe in this he was quite right. It was in the same way I knew and understood Meggie. It was because of this knowledge and understanding that I, at a great cost to myself, played one of the hardest parts that any mother can play—that of being silent, and letting tact take precedence over devoted love and maternal anxiety. When we were in the country in

August 1926, having our last and most happy holiday together, my husband and I were discussing Meggie one day, and I then said to him (what has often been in my heart these last grief-shadowed years) that sometimes I reproached myself where the child was concerned; that sometimes I felt, perhaps, that if I had been firmer, less sensitive of her feelings—had, in fact, exercised a stronger authority over her—I might have been a better friend. I cherish what he said to me then, as I cherish everything that he said to me in those last weeks of his life; he told me that I must never reproach myself where Meggie was concerned. That he had had the most pronounced admiration for me because he had watched me live through times of almost unendurable difficulty and anxiety about our child, and that I had always acted for the best. He pointed out to me also how, in the last year of her life, she had turned to me so completely, and had made me feel how absolutely necessary I was to her.

Of course, this comforted me at the time, and it comforts me now, but yet there are moments

when I recall those days when she was playing in *A Bill of Divorcement*, and I suffer once more all the pain and anxiety which her physical condition caused me, urging me to stand between her and all danger and yet unable to make any move forward. So my relief and delight can be well imagined when I saw her arrive back from Sweden on July 10th, 1922, radiantly happy, with a lovely colour in her dear little face and full of good spirits. It was in this condition, and in this spirit of joyousness, that she started out on the heavy rehearsals for *East of Suez*, though she went back for a time into the play of *Loyalties*, and carried on there eight times a week as usual.

She was immensely pleased to have been given the part of "Daisy" in *East of Suez*, although when she talked it over with me, as she did many times, she confessed that she thought perhaps she was just a little too young to be able to visualise this young woman, or to put just the amount of subtlety into her interpretation which the part called for. As the rehearsals went on, Meggie was at times terribly depressed, and I do know (what I think was known by

all her fellow-artists in the company) that she was desperately anxious and nervous. But that was her usual condition when rehearsing. She of course was acutely eager to follow all suggestions and left herself entirely in the hands of the producer. Nevertheless, I always felt she gave deep thought to every character she studied, and naturally responded better to some than to others. I do not believe she was very much in sympathy with "Daisy," but she was intensely proud of having been cast for a leading part and consequently was over-anxious to show her appreciation to Basil Dean for his faith in her ability to achieve a great success.

My own impression was, and this, I know, was shared by Eva and my niece May Hallatt, who was acting as Meggie's secretary just then and who was devoted to her cousins, that if it could have been possible for her to cease rehearsing a week before production, Meggie never would have broken down. She was stale ; she was dead tired ; her nerves were raw ; and her physical condition caused me endless anxiety. It was because of overstrain and fatigue that her voice gave out. I may, perhaps, take the

opportunity to state here that, though every now and then her voice would fail, there was no organic trouble with her throat. It is true she had frequent and very heavy colds, but the voice failure always came from over-fatigue and general debility. Not being able to appear at the dress rehearsal for *East of Suez*, Meggie always considered she had failed in this particular part.

I shall never forget the night of that dress rehearsal. I sat with her when she was in bed. Sybil Thorndike, like the good, sweet creature she is, had been in to see the child, to comfort her and "buck her up" and give advice about the poor tired throat, and I remained with Meggie for some hours. She looked just a sweet little girl lying in bed, so pathetic, so patient, and yet I, her mother, knew that there was a veritable swirl of anguish in her heart. That was Friday night. The next night was the production at His Majesty's Theatre, and how the child got through that first night only she herself could ever have told! She had to have electric treatment to her throat every time she came off the stage. She was overshadowed by

the fear that her voice would not last out. And, though she received the most amazing congratulations, her few words, whispered in my ear when I kissed her good night, told me that she herself regarded her performance as a failure.

I quote here from a letter which I received from the late Sir Ernest Hodder-Williams, in which he gave this tribute to my child :

“ I remember her in many parts, but one scene stands out : the first night of *East of Suez*. What a triumph of brain and spiritual pluck that was over weariness and physical weakness ! I shall never forget the last curtain ; she was simply superb ! ”

And here is the letter that Noel Coward wrote her that night :

“ MEGGIE MY DEAR !—Before resigning myself to my slumbers I must just tell you in cold blood what I think of you. Your performance is not only the best thing you have ever done, but the best thing anyone has done for years !! You played with

perfect sincerity and magnificent variety. Your opium bit, coming at the end of all that emotion in the previous acts, was exquisite and damnably difficult. I'm very, very proud of you.—NOEL."

Another letter :

" MY DEAR MISS ALBANESI,—May I be allowed to express my admiration for your work last night? You achieved what I should have believed to be impossible if I had read the play. You created in our heart a great sympathy for 'Daisy.' I was in front, in a seat not too good, but I was carried away by the directness and purity of your art.

" Yours very sincerely,

" GEORGE ARLISS."

I believe it was also the opinion of Mr. Dean that Meggie had failed in *East of Suez*, yet the curious part of all is this, that whenever strangers have spoken to me, as so many do and have done, about my daughter, it is generally her performance in *East of Suez* about which they

become eloquent. When I came back by sea from Naples last winter, there was on board a charming woman, who was travelling with her husband and small children, who heard by chance my name, and then came to talk to me about Meggie. She told me that she and her husband, both English people, lived about six hundred miles up country outside Sydney, that they had large plantations, and that they employed a good many Chinamen as gardeners. She told me that these Chinamen had, in a generality of cases, married a white woman, and she was therefore perfectly well acquainted with the disposition and the character of the children of these marriages. And then she told me that both she and her husband had been absolutely amazed by Meggie's presentment of "Daisy," the offspring of a union between the Englishman and a Chinese woman. It seemed to them incredible that a young girl who had never been East could have portrayed the character of "Daisy" so wonderfully. She also told me that when the news of Meggie's death reached Australia, though the child had never been there, it caused a perfect consternation.

Something unusual, something out of the ordinary, must surely have been born in that little creature? It was something she never realised herself. Many a time she has discussed her work with me, and always with a sense of gratitude for all that had come to her, but also with great doubt.

“ What have I done, Mummy? When people talk to me, and prophesy, and tell me that I have great promise, and that great things are expected of me, I am frightened! I have been very lucky—frightfully lucky! I have had magnificent chances—‘ Sonia ’ in *The Rising Sun*, ‘ Jill ’ in *The Skin Game*, ‘ Sydney Fairfield ’ in *A Bill of Divorcement*, ‘ Wanda ’ in *The First and the Last*, and ‘ Daisy ’ in *East of Suez*. Aren’t these wonderful characters for one so young on the stage as I am to have had the possibility of playing? You don’t know how grateful I am for the chances that I have had,” she said to me on one occasion, “ but *you* know I have still to make good. I have to show people that I can do better than I have done. I have to fulfil the promise that is expected of me. And what *shall* I do if I fail, Mummy? ”

But then, as I have first stated, Meggie never realised her own powers.

My dear old friend, T. P. O'Connor, wrote about her as follows :

“ All I have heard about Meggie Albanesi proves that her genius for the stage was instinctive, inevitable, a gift straight from the hand of nature. Thus Meggie found in her art an authentic heritage from an artistic father and a literary mother : it was a blending of two races—the Italian and the English. To see her even once was to realise that the English stage had brought out a great new actress who might go anywhere.”

Mr. J. T. Grein, who had declared her acting as “ Sonia ” in *The Rising Sun* to be a “ revelation,” wrote as follows about her in *The Sketch*.

“ In the brief and brilliant record of Meggie Albanesi there are achievements of rare quality. By her blood, that happy mixture of English and Latin which has given so much talent to drama and music, she had imagination and strength of will. And wonderful in her was the blend of the

twain encased in a striking personality, with a voice as telling as her eye. The moment she entered there was the spell of personality. One felt a brain at work as well as the passive glowing within. When Meggie Albanesi loosed the reins of her temperament, all was aglow around her. Hers was the emotional gift that rouses emotion in others. Hers, too, was the appeal to imagination that leaves impressions indelible for all time."

From the beautiful tribute in the *Sunday Times* which James Agate wrote I quote the following, and I make these quotations in order to prove my assertion that the child never realised the power that was within her.

"Though the span of Meggie Albanesi's life was short, attaining to not more than twenty-four years, it sufficed to create an indomitable spirit, an abiding place in our affection and memories. Perhaps the first thing to be said here is that she had the faculty, vouchsafed to none but the most sensitive artists, of establishing immediate contact with her audience. There was no

question of suspending judgment until the piece and the player were well on their way. She had but to speak and that voice, which vibrated like a harp touched by an exquisite hand, awoke a chord in the heart of the listener. . . . This little actress had but to appear and interest centred in her. She might content herself with a corner of the stage, but attention would at once be withdrawn from more magnoperative happenings in the middle. You felt about Albanesi's characters that she had not only thought them out, but fought them out within her own bosom. She was, so to speak, the first victim of that pity and terror which it is the privilege of the artist to evoke. . . . In *A Bill of Divorcement* it was obvious that she entered very deeply and re-created the agony of Sydney Fairfield in that play. The scene at the end, in which the daughter took her father in her arms, was one of spiritual anguish on both sides of the curtain. It was heart that spoke to heart, and tears were shed by the actress which sprang from no will of mere accomplishment and facility. Too



AS DAISY IN "EAST OF SUEZ"

indomitable a spirit in a body too frail was the tragedy of this young actress. . . . Perhaps we may say that her range was small, but in that range she was a complete and perfect artist. It is idle to speculate upon what she might have accomplished. Let us reflect once more that out of the artist who means execution there goes a spirit which outlives the most untimely ending. Meggie Albanesi is dead, and her art is become an enduring fragrance, enshrined, I venture to think, in the famous verse of Malherbe—

Mais elle étoit du monde, où les plus belles choses
Ont le pire destin ;
Et, rose, elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un matin."

A very beautiful appreciation of Meggie appeared in the *Morning Post* two days after she died, and I reproduce here a portion of the article.

"In the brief span of her acting career, Meggie Albanesi had already accomplished so much that her future was a subject of avid interest on the part of those who loved fine work in the theatre. By sheer strength of

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personality, by a dynamic force which was positively electrifying, she thrilled her audiences and gripped their heart-strings as few young actresses have done within a recollection extending over thirty years of play-acting. For sheer tenderness and exquisite sensibility I can recall few things more beautiful than her acting in *A Bill of Divorcement*, in which a girl, torn between love and duty, sacrifices her life's happiness to the grim task of tending her half-demented father. The pathos in it was too deep for words. Nothing came amiss to her in her work. Let the task be light or heavy, it was approached with the same enthusiasm, high endeavour, and the absolute giving of herself to the task in hand which made the joy of achievement her greatest reward."

Meggie paid the penalty of the strain of that first performance of *East of Suez* by having to leave the play for two or three days in the first week. The rest did her good, but she went back, I am afraid, with her enthusiasm just a little dampened. Having failed to appear at

the dress rehearsal, she missed the Press of the Sunday papers, and, although she received many other flattering criticisms, yet I could read her heart so surely, and so I knew the glamour had gone out of *East of Suez* for Meggie, and, though she gave of her very best (as she could not help doing), the bitterness of a disappointment crept so surely into her mind that it increased that disposition to ill-health which was so sorrowfully palpable to my eyes.

Had it not been for this great disappointment, and the knowledge that she was very, very tired, I don't think Meggie would ever have left *East of Suez*. But a holiday was absolutely necessary, and so, after playing a very heavy part for nearly five months, she obtained permission to go to America for a few weeks. I took her down myself and saw her on board the *Mauretania*, and then I stood on the dock and watched the big ship go away until at last I could not see that little figure, and that little white face, because the tears would come.

Her first letter, written on board ship and posted when she landed, reported that for the first two days she had been absolutely homesick

and quite alone. And then she said people began to flutter round her, and make a great fuss of her, and by the time New York was reached she was having a "real good time." Her sister had arranged, of course, to meet her on her arrival, and other people had also gone to meet her. One of them—a very prominent manager in New York—had manœuvred things so cleverly that Meggie's luggage was got off, and she herself was led down the gangway surrounded by admirers, to be installed in a car and driven away whilst those who were standing about at the docks, in Section A of the Customs, waited there until the ship was empty, and waited in vain!

Of course, I only know what my daughter, Eva, has told me about the happenings in America, but it seems that the child was ill nearly all the time. She suffered so much with her head, and many times had to break social engagements because she was not well enough to leave her room. But she managed, nevertheless, to sandwich in a good deal of enjoyment, and was fêted royally.

As a good many people could testify, Meggie

was very fond of jokes, and could carry them through very well. Eva tells me that on one night they were going out, a large party (to some cabaret I think), when, going down in the lift, one of the young men of the party shot out his opera hat, and for fun put it on Meggie's head. She was then wearing her hair in a very severe fashion—parted in the middle and coiled at the back of her head (the way she wore it in *East of Suez*; incidentally, she wanted very much to cut off her hair, but this was not allowed) and she was wearing very long earrings and was very charmingly dressed. When the hat was taken off her head she turned to the owner.

“Do you dare me to wear that?”

And he answered “Yes.” Meggie said, “All right, give it to me.”

And when they got out of the lift, Meggie walked solemnly through the crowded lounge in her attractive evening cloak, her long earrings, and a very severe expression, wearing this opera hat perched on the top of her head. Though she was stared at, no one laughed, but, as a matter of fact, her sister declares she looked extraordinarily pretty in this unusual headgear.

In speaking to me about her one day, Ivor Novello touched enthusiastically on Meggie's sense of fun, and a little later he wrote to me about this. I quote from his letter :

“ I have seen and read many beautiful tributes to the exquisite art of Meggie Albanesi. I have also known of many charming and touching incidents where Meggie proved herself a sweet and a true friend, but one facet of Meggie's character which I have never seen alluded to was her ‘ party spirit.’ In those hectic years immediately after the war, before the reaction had set in, I used to give two and sometimes three parties a month, and I can pay no higher compliment to Meggie than that of saying that no party was quite complete without her. She always arrived knowing that she was going to enjoy herself, and her enjoyment seemed to infect the whole room. Sometimes at the beginning of a party, when things were, as they usually are, a little ‘ sticky,’ I would hear Meggie's voice coming along the passage and would breathe a sigh of relief,

‘That’s all right, Meggie is here.’ On those impromptu festive occasions there was never a trace of the ‘storm-wracked genius,’ as some people have tried to describe Meggie. She was just an artist relaxing after her hours of tension, and I am convinced that her utter enjoyment of the actor’s playtime (as I always insist on calling the hours between 12 and 2 o’clock) helped her to face the strenuous day of rehearsals or the emotional strain of acting a heavy part that was to come. I am looking at my party book now, where, before departing, my friends and guests scribbled their names, and I can honestly say that those pages on which Meggie had scrawled her attractive signature bring back the happiest of all party memories.”

Well, her visit to New York was stretched out longer than was anticipated, but at last we got cables saying that she was returning on the *Majestic*. And it was on her fateful voyage back from America in March that Meggie started the dreadful illness which finally put her into the grave. She was always, as I

have tried to explain, difficult to reason with where her health was concerned. She went on board with a very heavy cold, and the ship's doctor, Dr. Beaumont (whom I saw afterwards when I travelled on the *Majestic*), told me that he considered her a very fragile creature. And when he heard that she intended to go into the swimming bath, he remonstrated with her. He told her that she was in no condition to risk a chill when her cold was so heavy. Unfortunately, she did not listen to his advice. I believe she went twice or three times into the swimming bath in one day. The result was an attack of peritonitis on board ship, and I believe that for some hours her life was in danger. Her temperature went up, as it always did with Meggie, as high as any temperature could go, and then it dropped. Dr. Beaumont told me that he almost went on his knees to implore her to let him put her into a nursing-home in Southampon, and to have her properly cared for. But she would not listen. To all his pleadings she replied:

“If I go into a nursing-home in Southampton, I shall kill my mother and father. And I'm already better. I feel almost well.”

Alas ! courageously and splendidly as she tried to carry off this grave illness, a sword went through both our hearts, her father's and mine, when, instead of seeing a little figure come running towards us to fling her arms round our necks, we saw a prostrate figure being carried from the train by two porters. As usual, Meggie had attracted the attention and stirred the interest of those who travelled with her, and it was a charming middle-aged American who was superintending her removal from the train to the car, which we had fortunately hired to meet her. When he saw me he was full of sympathy.

“Are you this little lady's mother? Well, I am afraid, madam, she is very ill.”

We got her home, and she was carried upstairs to her flat, and then I sent her father back to our own home, and I stayed with her. Though she looked a shadow—such big eyes, and such thin cheeks—she was full of spirit, and was so happy to be back in her own little abode. I did not leave her until about three o'clock in the morning, and then she told me she was going to sleep. The next day I knew, however,

that she was worse than she had been the day before.

In fact, in a day or two's time we were forced to realise that, though she had come back to us and made such a brave show of being happy, she was in reality in a very serious condition. This was forced home when it was determined that she must undergo an operation.

I can see Meggie now, sitting up in bed whilst we were all gathered in her sitting-room. Mrs. Alec Rea was there, and Caroline Curtis-Brown (she had always been so fond of the child), my husband, myself, the doctor, and the specialist. Meggie could look from her bedroom into the sitting-room, and she suddenly called to us all to come back. Fixing her beautiful eyes on the surgeon she said :

“ I know perfectly well you want to cut me up, don't you ? ”

He laughed, but he was also grave, and he told her that he really did consider an operation necessary. She had been under his care (he was a specialist) for ten days, and this was his ultimatum. Meggie looked at him, and then

she stretched out her hand to me and held mine in hers. And she said :

“ When ? ”

His answer was prompt : “ At once.”

“ To-morrow ? ” queried the child.

The surgeon nodded his head. Meggie turned to me.

“ Righto, Mummy,” she said. “ You’ll get me into a nursing-home.”

Of course, that was done for me, and that night, after our dinner, my husband and I walked round to see her before she was settled for the night. We were both of us terribly upset, and she knew it. It was her father, however, about whom she was most concerned, because she knew by much experience that I possessed a great reserve of strength and courage.

And ever since they were little children there had been what I might call a slogan in our family life—“ Daddy must not be worried.” It was held by all, from myself throughout the household. And it was followed religiously by my two little people. For instance, when Eva was quite small she suffered terribly from

rheumatism and very bad throats caused by rheumatism. It was not always possible to keep these facts away from her father, but I have known her come to me when she could scarcely swallow and ask me eagerly, "Please don't let Daddy know ; he'll fret so much."

The same with Meggie. It was because he was always so over-anxious about them. I remember on one occasion Meggie having a very bad fall, in which she cut open her leg just below the knee, causing a really ugly wound for some time. The leg had to be bandaged and properly treated, and yet we contrived to keep this accident away from "Daddy" very successfully. How the child managed it I don't know, but she always contrived not to limp or walk stiffly when she thought her father's eyes would be on her. The fact was that my husband was something more than a father to Eva and Meggie ! They adored him ; he was their hero ; he was everything that signified beauty and goodness. And when they were very young they took upon themselves to share with me the task of keeping away from their father anything

and everything that might distress him, or cause him anxiety.

This was what was working in Meggie's heart that night after we had left her at the nursing-home. And it found expression in this little letter which I now append, written in pencil immediately after we had gone.

“MY OWNEST AND DEAREST DADDY,—
Please try not to worry about me more than you can help. I love you so much, and you do me so much good when you are with me, so you must come and see me as soon as I am ready to see anyone. I know this is for the best. I am quite happy about everything now except *you*. I don't want you to fret, darling. All my love to you.—MEGGIE.”

That little note was sent round by hand to the hotel where we were then living, and the following morning we waited for nearly two hours and a half at the nursing-home, to be given at last the news that the operation had been very successful. It was, of course, a serious operation, for the attack of peritonitis

which she had had on board ship had resulted in an abscess, and she was operated upon also for appendicitis, and there was great inflammation all through the body. She was not pronounced out of danger until two days later, and then she made rapid strides to recovery.

The place that Meggie had in the hearts of those who knew her and loved her was proved by their anxiety during this illness. It is no exaggeration to say that the nursing-home did not know what to do with the flowers; they kept coming, and coming, and coming, overflowing into the passages and into other rooms. And they helped to cheer and uplift a spirit which was almost crushed with pain and inevitable depression. In the nursing-home she was adored, even though at times she was rather naughty. On one occasion, for instance, when I arrived, I was greeted by a number of perturbed people, who told me that my girl would not let anybody touch her or do anything for her, and that she was crying. When I went in I saw her propped up with pillows, and the moment she saw me she stretched out her hands.

“ Oh, Mummy, Mummy, take me away from here ! I don’t want to stay here another hour ; I want to be with you.”

I fell into her mood.

“ Of course, darling,” I said. “ I will make all arrangements. We can get an ambulance. Dr. Bevan will be coming in a moment or two, and we’ll get his permission. Now it is only just to know where you would like to go.”

I stood beside her and took her in my arms, and she leant her head against me, and she said :

“ Oh, Mummy, you are so comforting ! Just to know that you are there—oh ! it does help so much ! ” And she added in the same breath, “ Mummy, don’t ever get thin. You won’t be half so nice and comforting if you aren’t fat ! ”

I smoothed her hair, and I kissed her just as I had done when she was a little child, and then there came a knock at the door, and the doctor appeared. And I said to him :

“ Oh, Dr. Bevan, you know Meggie wants to leave here ? We can’t do it without your permission, but I think it can be arranged, can’t it ? ”

Before he could speak she sat bolt upright.

“ You both of you know perfectly well I *can't* leave here, so don't be fools,” she said. And then she laughed. “ But that's a good one ! Fancy me calling you a fool, Dr. Bevan ! ”

Dr. Gates was really Meggie's own special doctor, but he was away at that time, and Dr. Bevan, a partner of his, had taken Meggie in hand. They were both of them so fond of the child ; in fact, Dr. Bevan had known her when she had been a baby.

When she was able to leave the nursing-home she was taken to Mrs. Alec Rea's beautiful home in the country, where every care and thought was lavished on her, and a nurse went with her. From there, about three weeks later, she went to Folkestone.

Of course, it was urged on us, and on her, that she ought to have at least two to three months' complete rest after such a serious operation before going back to work. But here again we were faced by Meggie's stubborn resolve to sweep away all prudence and wise advice. Of course she went back to work much too soon, but it must also be honestly declared that



IN "THE LILIES OF THE FIELD"

unless she had been actually carried off, and kept by force on the flat of her back, nothing would have induced her to be persuaded to do the wise and sensible thing.

I don't quite know how she struggled through the rehearsals for *The Lilies of the Field*. I do know that on the first night, after she had been enthusiastically received, and she had to sit on a couch near a table, that she was trembling so much from weakness and nervousness that the table trembled with her. Though it was a very simple, delightful comedy, it was in a sense hard work for Meggie, because she had so many changes; also she had to make curtsies, and these were rather painful to one who had only just recovered from an operation. But the mere fact of being back on the stage and at work acted, I think, beneficially on her for a time at least, although those who, like myself, were in her intimate life, knew only too surely that she was always suffering.

The Clemence Dane new play had been temporarily shelved, but it was to be produced after the run of *The Lilies of the Field*.

The only time in which Meggie ever turned

to her father to ask him to move in her business was when the question of her appearance in some Playbox matinées cropped up in the summer of that year. She told her father that she really did not feel equal physically to acting and rehearsing, and she asked him to see if he could not get her out of this engagement, but when she found that by backing out she would cause a certain amount of trouble she at once changed her mind and determined to fall in with the wishes of the management, especially when it was pointed out that her inclusion in the cast would be valuable. So she appeared in that strange play *Melloney Holtspur*, by John Masefield.

In connection with this performance, the following little note from the author will be read with interest :

“ DEAR MISS ALBANESI,—I was much moved by your playing of ‘ Lenda ’ yesterday. I want to send you a word of thanks, and praise, and admiration. You are going to be the wonder of our stage, and I am so glad to think of my play being one of the little

rungs of your ladder. All blessings upon your progress.

“ Yours sincerely,

“ JOHN MASEFIELD.”

So for a fortnight Meggie gave eleven performances a week, unfortunately in what was the hottest spell we had in 1923.

Nevertheless, though undoubtedly tired, she really enjoyed her work at the Ambassadors, and, possessing a very quick sense of fun and a humour all her own, managed to have some jolly times. She loved teasing Patty, and I have assisted at some very amusing incidents in her dressing-room.

Many a time, when they were little children, I have heard Eva laughing in the nursery. She was such a splendid audience for Meggie ; it was delightful to hear that childish laughter.

The spirit of fun which Ivor Novello described so well crept out in unexpected places. She found, for instance, plenty of amusement in and about the theatre. When she was playing in *The Lilies of the Field*, the

Robot play *R.U.R.* was being performed at the St. Martin's Theatre. As will probably be remembered, there was a scene in this Robot play when the mechanical figures stormed the house of the human beings, and there was a great deal of noise in consequence—firing and shouting. The stage doors of the Ambassador's Theatre and the St. Martin's face one another, and it is a neighbourhood in which there are crowds of little children living in tenement houses close to the theatres. Of course, these small individuals, as might be expected, forgather in the wide passage which runs from West Street past the two stage doors.

Meggie's dressing-room at the Ambassadors was below the level of the street, and she had a window high up in the wall, but she was never able to have that window open because the children used to throw things in. She was, however, on very good terms with this world of little ragamuffins, and used to tell many amusing stories about them. For instance, when it was considered necessary to arrange matters so that the shouting and firing of the Robots should not disturb the tranquillity of

The Lilies of the Field, this led to the company at the Ambassadors leaving earlier than that at the St. Martin's. When the noise and the firing was heard, all the little boys gathered outside would take their part in the scene and would fall flat on the ground, pretending that they were shot.

One funny little anecdote I can tell here happened as Meggie was leaving the theatre one night. She had remarked on many occasions that among those clustered about the stage doors there was a tiny little child who could scarcely toddle. This little creature was in the care of another child probably not more than two or three years older than herself, and on one night Meggie spoke to this little "mother," and remonstrated with her.

"You know," she said severely, "that baby ought to be in bed and asleep; it's far too late for her to be out here."

The little girl looked up at her and laughed; and this is what she answered:

"Lor' bless you, Meggie!" she said, "*she's* all right! Why she ain't missed one blinking performance, she ain't!"

The children would clamour for pennies and sweets, and even for cigarettes. They were very outspoken, too ; in fact, one very hot night, when Meggie had gone outside during one of her waits to get a little air and to smoke a cigarette, a small boy of about five stood in front of her and asked her for a smoke. She told him that he should have pennies instead, and that he was far too small to have cigarettes. By way of answer, he informed her that she had no right to teach him what to do, because she was doing the wrong thing herself by sitting outside the theatre and smoking in her stage clothes !

It was while she had been recovering from her operation that Meggie and I had long talks about her taking up some studies. She was very eager to continue Italian, and she also intended to work with someone to polish her French. Then, again, she was very anxious to do serious readings of Shakespeare with someone. Here I may remark that for a year or so she had taken up the part of " Juliet " to study with Kate Rorke, and that was practically her first Shakespearean part, although, of course,

when she was at the Academy of Dramatic Art she had played in one or two scenes from Shakespeare.

In connection with this, I quote here a letter from Miss Kate Rorke :

“ I well remember Meggie's appearance with me in *A Pair of Spectacles* revival during the war. Was it not her first part with du Maurier after having won the Gold Medal at the Academy of Dramatic Art? And during that dreadful week of air raids, I remember how she cheered us all by her gaiety and fearlessness. It was after this (during 1919, I think) that she came to read Shakespeare with me, and I consider that in her a great ‘ Juliet ’ was lost to the stage. I greatly appreciated her dramatic ability, and her portrayal of ‘ Sydney ’ in *A Bill of Divorcement* remains in my memory as one of the most haunting performances I have seen in the theatre.”

But her professional work lay almost altogether in modern plays. I think this was

beginning to fret her. At all events, she got the idea into her mind that she must develop ; she must study, and get out of a narrow groove. Much to which she had been indifferent—in fact, at which she had almost sneered a year or so earlier—became now a matter of paramount importance with her. Her music always ran, as it were, in the background of her thoughts. Mr. Rowsby Woof, in his letter, stated that she had taught herself some Scriabine pieces. As a matter of fact, she was incited to do this and to work at the piano by our friend Nettie White, who lived in the country, who studied for years with my husband and had always had a great interest in Meggie because the child shared with her a great love for horses ; in fact, she got her first cross-country riding lessons from Miss White. These Scriabine preludes were worked at to be a great surprise to “Daddy,” and they gave him immense pleasure. As a matter of fact, he told me that it was astonishing to him to hear the child play them, because she had given so little suggestion of showing so much technique and feeling when she had been a student at the Royal Academy

of Music, and he was not only surprised, but delighted, and this, of course, made her very happy. I think she would have gone on working seriously at her piano if she had lived.

There was a time, too, when she had her voice placed, and took singing lessons with Miss Pitt-Soper. But Meggie discarded singing because she was afraid that it would develop her chest! And anything that had to do with the question of putting on any flesh was terrible for her; in fact, living in the age when boyish figures are all the rage, both she and Eva, oddly enough, reproached me because they were born with a suggestion of what in my youth would have been called a pretty figure, but which did not appeal to them in the very least. Everything that she could do to keep herself thin Meggie did; not that it was necessary really to resort to drastic measures, for she grew visibly thinner day after day.

With her determination to work, and to broaden her mind, and, above all, to come into close acquaintance with classical work for the stage, there ran also a great desire to get as much fresh air as possible. In the summer of

1923 she bought a little car, which was a great joy to her. I remember I was her first passenger in this car. She had been learning to drive for about a week when she telephoned to say she was coming to show me the car on her way down to the theatre. After I had duly admired the new possession, she looked at me with rather a wicked twinkle in her eye :

“ Are you a sport, mother ? ”

Trembling inwardly, yet outwardly very bold, I declared I was a *great* sport !

“ Very well then,” she said, “ come right along ! ”

So I got tucked into that little motor-car, and she took me through all the traffic until we got to the side street where the stage door of the Ambassadors Theatre was. And when we stopped she turned to me and said :

“ You’re right, Mummy ; you *are* a sport ! ” And then she added laughingly, “ *I* was in a deadly funk the whole way.”

That was only the first of many drives, and I was very delighted that she had this little car, because she was able to get out of town and spend some hours in the country. A craving

for as much fresh air as possible sent her every week-end to Kingsgate Castle Hotel, near Broadstairs. This journey was, of course, too far for her to motor. She would go down by the midnight train on Saturdays and come back on Mondays in time for the performance. And I have it on the authority of Lorn Loraine, her friend and mine, that down at the sea Meggie was just like a little child. She was so happy, and she looked so well, that even one who was so intimately in her life as Mrs. Loraine was had no idea that at such times she was practically never free from pain.

She was deeply attached to Lorn, as I am, for it has so happened that (a wonderful mother herself) she has played the part of a daughter to me in the two terrible tragic happenings which have fallen upon me in the last three and a half years. Eva was in America when Meggie died, and in India when I lost her father, and what I should have done without Lorn Loraine I really do not know! I shall never be able to express my gratitude to her as I should wish to do; the debt is too heavy.

Usually one or another of Meggie's colleagues would go to Broadstairs with her. On one occasion Frances Carson was her companion, and in connection with this, Frances wrote me the following charming letter :

“ I had an interesting and lovely week-end at Broadstairs with Meggie once in which we had some real talks, and I learnt of a Meggie which was quite different from the one in London. It made me realise what a child she was in spite of her precocious development. With her little face looking up into a glorious sunset, she poured out her hopes and desires, and also her realisation of mistakes. There was in her that evening a spiritual note I had not seen before. And then our serious talk came to an end because the chair in which she had been sitting suddenly collapsed ! How one enjoyed laughing with Meggie ! She was full of the most delightful ways. . . . It is no exaggeration to say that, whenever I was with her, I seemed to be full of her personality and magnetism. Undoubtedly she had a flame, a flame that

will never be extinguished in my memory. Blessed little Meggie! She will always be missed, and she will always remain the brightest light I, at least, have seen on the English stage."

Meggie's argument to me that she had everything still to do, and had done so little, was just an expression of that nervous humility which is part—and a very large part—of the construction of all true artistic natures. I know now she had set a very high standard for herself, and, though honestly nervous, yet was unconsciously spurred on to action by the knowledge that so many people whose opinion counted enormously saw a great future for her.

And yet I often wonder to myself what the child would have thought could she have read the amazing and touching tributes which came from almost every quarter after her death. In reading through these tributes once again, and searching through the really immense number of letters which came to her father and to myself, the tears will rush to my eyes,

blinding me for a time, and a fresh pang goes through my heart when I recall how little Meggie knew about herself and her work. Though it was the humility of an artist which assailed her, the spirit which actuated her in her work was something bigger and deeper than mere ambition. Undoubtedly there was an urge in her heart to rise and again rise in those last few months of her life on earth.

A letter Mr. Nigel Playfair has written me touches on this :

“ Nothing I can say can express in any way the admiration that I felt for your daughter’s talent and the loss to the English dramatic art which her early death occasioned. I knew her only very slightly, but I did on one occasion ask her to come to play ‘ *Rosalind* ’ in our production of *As You Like It*. It was at an early period of her short career, and she felt that she was not ready for so difficult a part, and that she must gain more experience first. I think this in itself showed how sensitive her feelings were as an artist.”

A critic whose initials are M. E., in the *Daily Herald* of December 10th, 1923, wrote as follows :

“ In the death of Meggie Albanesi the stage has lost the only one of its younger members who offered, not promise, but fulfilment. It is perhaps a slight consolation that what one saw in her was not the hope of things to come when she had matured, but the perfection of art combined with the charm of youth. It was not what she might do, as what she did do.

Her first big part was a special Sunday performance (*The Rising Sun*). She was still in her teens ; she was unknown ; she was not even beautiful ; but she extracted from that part every ounce of pathos, and beauty, and significance. Her performance was at once essentially sensitive and yet entirely enforced. The combination of such discretion and such youth foretold her genius ; yet even then there was in her work a little touch of tragedy, a certain aloof wistfulness that remained with her always.

In her brief and brilliant career she never had a failure. I doubt if she ever received an adverse criticism. The battle of her spirit with the frailty of her body was at least encouraged by appreciation. I came in contact myself with a small proof of the admiration and love in which she was universally held. At one time it was my business to write plays, and to discuss with others the possible casts. It is no exaggeration to say that in nine out of ten cases, on being asked, 'Whom did you think of as your heroine?' the answer came, 'Meggie Albanesi.' It is doubtful if the stage could sustain a greater loss than that of this brilliant young creature who, with unerring simplicity and subtlety of method, instinctively did again and again just what was needed, just what was right."

This is a quotation from *The Times* of December 10th, 1923 :

"Margherita Albanesi had already in her short life done work of real distinction, and in the opinion of those best qualified to

judge she had given definite promise of being one day numbered among the great actresses in the history of the English stage. For she was never content with her advantages of beauty and charm ; she had the humility of the true artist, and no pains were too great for her to take in improving and extending the range of her art.”

On the other hand, Philip Page, in his article printed in the *Sunday Chronicle* of December 16th, gives a more qualified tribute.

“ Meggie Albanesi was an actress of brilliant promise rather than of great achievement. I do not say she would not have achieved great things ; she had it in her, I sincerely believe, to rival, and even eclipse, any of the women on the British stage for the past fifty years. But from the artistic point of view we must mourn what might have been rather than what was. Her mental outlook, wide as it was, had not attained its full scope, her powers had not been put to the fullest tests. A sense of proportion must

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be kept. Those who already give Meggie Albanesi a place among the immortals are doing her poor service. What is more, they are overlooking the greater part of the tragedy—a tragedy of *what might have been*. Her sympathetic daughter in Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*; her whimsical humour in *The Lilies of the Field* (the last part she ever played); her incomparable girlishness in that worthless but successful play, *The Charm School*—here are exquisite memories. . . . Tragedy was certainly hers in *East of Suez*, but her part, superbly though she played it, was superficially written, and the play was conventional. . . . There is no other girl of her age on the stage to-day who can be compared with her, albeit her potentiality was greater than anything she had ever time or opportunity of fulfilling. But when another actress of such dazzling promise does come, we shall say, 'How Meggie Albanesi would have played that part!' And thus will her memory be green until a generation shall arise who knew her not."

Among her many friends, none was more devoted to Meggie, and her career as an actress, than Mr. Henry C. Shelley. I was on the Atlantic, going to America, when I read his article in *The Spur* on January 15th, 1924. It is a very beautiful article. He speaks, as so many others have, of her great success as "Sydney Fairfield" in *A Bill of Divorcement*, and he mentions what I always felt was a great moment for her in that play—a moment in which she had, so Mr. Shelley says, a unique opportunity of displaying her gifts of silent acting.

"For several minutes she had to stand on a staircase in silence while the story was developing by two players below, and in this moment of wordlessness it was her acting, and not the dialogue of the players, which held one's tense interest. Despite all these memories"—in an earlier part of the article Mr. Shelley has dealt with her performances in *Reparation* and *The Charm School*—"I find it difficult to dissect her acting. Perhaps the most outstanding reason of her success in parts so varied was that her work was a

triumph of understanding emotion, the issue of perfect sympathy with the character she portrayed. It was temperament rather than technique. Fame," Mr. Shelley continues, "could not spoil Meggie. Although in four short years she achieved a position on the London stage greater than any actress of her generation, she had none of the insolence of success. She treated all references to her triumphs as jokes. 'Don't be so absurd,' she retorted to me one day. 'Why, I have gone the whole length of the queue outside the theatre, expecting to see the people nudge each other and say, "There's Meggie Albanesi," and no one takes the slightest notice !'

"It was her modesty which kept her unspoilt. In writing to thank me once for an article I had written, Meggie replied, 'It seems like a dream to me to read such wonderful appreciation of what I am doing. At the same time, it makes me feel a little afraid, because there is so much, so very much I have to learn ; and because I want to go on pleasing people, and may not always succeed.' "

This is just what the child used to say to me, not once, but many times.

One of the most beautiful memories I have about my child lies in the fact that she was greatly loved, and more particularly by the members of her own profession.

T. P. O'Connor, in his article, wrote about this :

“ She had a singular power of attracting the affection of the members of her profession and of her own sex. Nobody grudged her success, everybody wanted to help her ; a curious phenomenon, and not a common one in a profession which necessarily engenders passion and jealousy.”

Again, in *The Evening Standard* of December 10th, 1923 :

“ One of the remarkable things about Miss Albanesi was the interest which other actors took in her. She was regarded as something rather outside the customary rivalries and jealousies. I remember her telling me how Mr. Leslie Faber had taught her to put on her

Chinese 'make-up' in *East of Suez*; how Miss Sybil Thorndike used to come round from her own theatre to attend to that delicate throat in the *entr'actes*, and how Nelson Keys would take endless pains to help her in any new part."

I knew Mr. Faber was very much interested in Meggie, and this letter from him touches me deeply :

"I should be very proud," he writes, "to be associated with Meggie, in however slight a degree. Unfortunately, I only once had the pleasure of playing with her, and it was during the rehearsals for this play that I got to know her, and to appreciate her extraordinary qualities. I came to these rehearsals never having met Meggie; she was a complete stranger. At that time I was in a highly strung, nervous state, and with little strength to cope with most trying and difficult rehearsals; in fact, I was almost at the end of my tether. One day, sitting at a table by her side in the play, the producer asked

me to go through a long and difficult speech for the third time. I hesitated to begin; I was quite overwrought, and about to collapse when I felt a hand gently pressing my knee. It was Meggie's little hand! It was a gesture of such sympathy and understanding from a fellow-player as I had never before experienced, nor have I since. Her evident understanding and sympathy banished my hysteria, and gave me such strength that I was able to rise and go through with my long speech for the third time calmly and completely self-possessed. I am quite aware that this is a merely trifling incident, but to me it is unforgettable, not only from the way it affected me personally, but as a proof of the extreme artistic sensitiveness that Meggie possessed. From then on we often met, we often had long talks together, and always on the one subject—the art of acting. Her enthusiasm and her love for her work always made me glad that I was an actor. She made me believe that here was something worth doing, and entirely worth while."

Perhaps the reason why Meggie was so popular with all those among whom she worked and lived was because she was so loyal, and very just. I will give a little instance of this.

I was on one occasion criticising rather severely a performance by a certain actress of a certain part, and Meggie checked me. She apologised for doing this, saying :

“ Of course, darling, you will naturally say you have a right to your own opinion, but I don't quite agree with you. You are awfully clever, I know that, but you are my mother, and I am a young actress. And if people hear you criticising another actress so severely they will judge you rather harshly, because they will immediately attribute this criticism to the fact that I am your child.”

More than one person, when they wrote about her, set down the fact of her loyalty.

In the *Referee* it was written :

“ Never, during the whole time I knew her, do I remember Meggie saying an unkind thing about man or woman, more particularly about her fellow-artists.”

And many and many of the letters which I have been reading just lately all give her this wonderful tribute of loyalty.

I will quote what Sybil Thorndike wrote :

“ I must write to you; I cannot get you out of my thoughts. Darling little Meggie, everyone loved her ! It’s a big, big loss to us all who were her friends, and to the stage. How we loved her beautiful work ! I cannot say what I mean ; words are so foolish. But it must be that she had finished, had got farther than any of us, and has just moved on to do bigger work. We don’t know much about it, but God is our Father. And a beautiful soul like Meggie will be doing greater work, and I am sure not far away from us all. I had never heard Meggie say anything but good, kind things of her fellow-artists, and everyone felt that she was a real friend.”

Stephen McKenna wrote a very touching letter and in it he said :

“ It is dreadful to think that all her wonderful promise and achievements have been cut short, and that she has slipped away

when she was still hardly more than a child. She leaves a fine public record, and a very fragrant memory in the affections of all who knew her."

Gertrude Lawrence sent me the following few words which are to me very eloquent :

" Dear Meggie and I were close friends, and you know how I loved her. All I have now is the memory of a very dear friendship which was taken from me all too soon, but which I always try to live up to, and prove worthy of."

One of the last and happiest memories of Meggie was a little dinner that she gave to her father on November 4th, 1923. It was his birthday, and she invited us to dine with her at the Embassy Club. We had grown very much out of the world even before we lost her, but, anxious to do what the child wanted, my husband fell in with her wishes ; a fellow-guest at her dinner was Michael Arlen.

I have never seen Meggie look prettier than she did that night. Her appearance was

remarked upon by many people who spoke to me. She seemed to be radiant, and she was so delighted and excited at having lured her father out of the background, as it were, that she was in the gayest spirits. How could one possibly have imagined that in only a few short weeks more that beautiful, radiant little figure would have been swept out of reach for always ! It is a joy to me to believe, as I do, that, despite the fact that she was never well in those last few months of her life, Meggie was very happy. If only her sister had not been so far away, she would have wanted for nothing. Eva and she loved one another very deeply, and Meggie fretted about her sister very considerably in those days. She was, however, greatly interested in her various studies, and there were other matters outside her work and her theatre to delight her. A dear girl friend, Lena Cobham, one whom she had known and played with when they both had been very small, became engaged to be married when she was staying with Meggie in her flat. This was a great event !

And I am not quite sure that it did not put

into the child's mind the thought that she, too, might venture into matrimony. As a matter of fact, she said so to me one afternoon when I was sitting in her dressing-room with her at the Ambassadors Theatre. I am afraid I laughed, because it was a well-known fact between us that, though she repeatedly imagined that she was in love, this state of affairs never lasted very long. I used to say to her (and I was quite sincere in this) that I did not think she had come to that state of certainty about her own feelings which could be the only possible ground on which a happy marriage could be built up.

She was a little cross with me for laughing on this particular occasion, but at the end she laughed herself, because she knew I understood her strange and sweet character ; so complex ; sometimes just a simple, clinging little child, and then a woman—a woman with clearer vision, more strength of will and purpose, than I have ever been able to claim.

Marriage for Meggie was not a thing that would come soon, nor could she take it lightly. But she was intensely interested in Lena's

engagement to Reginald Palmer, and promised, of course, to be the first bridesmaid at the wedding in February. It makes one's heart ache to think that Lena's bridal bouquet was taken up by her mother and placed on Meggie's grave the day after the wedding. Here I may digress to say that, often as I go to the grave, I very rarely fail to find even now some little bunch of flowers, some remembrance, from one or another of the friends who cherish my girl's memory.

About the middle of November, I think it must have been, it was decided that Meggie should play the part of "Joan" in *A Magdalen's Husband*. This was an adaptation of the well-known novel by Milton Rosmer and Edward Percy, who was the author of that fine play *If Four Walls Told*. It was a very emotional and tragic part, and, as such, made a direct appeal to Meggie. She was intensely interested in this production, and she threw herself into the part with all that intensity which was so characteristic of her, and this although she was very poorly in those days.

It is very sweet to me to recall how completely

she turned to me just then. We used to talk to one another every morning on the telephone ; in fact, Meggie had a communication installed in my room at the hotel where I was living on purpose that we could speak whenever we wanted to. And each day it was, When could she see me ? When could I come ?

And I used to go very frequently, and sit with her when she came back after a *matinée* or after a rehearsal. She seemed to be overshadowed with nervousness about her health, and all the time she was under doctors' orders.

I remember so well one day I had been waiting for her, sitting by the fire, and when she came into the room she was in great spirits, and very excited. She came up to me, she kissed me, and then she dropped me a curtsy, and she said :

“ Let me introduce you, Madame Albanesi, to a great actress ! ” And then she began to laugh. “ Me, Mummy ! Me ! ” And she pointed to herself.

And then she sat down on the hearthrug in front of the fire and she gave the explanation. She said :

“ We did the last act to-day. And you know, Mummy dear, Basil doesn’t often throw bouquets to me, but he was simply wonderful this afternoon ! When I’d got through to the end, he came up to me, and he took both my hands in his, and, Mummy, if you’ll believe me, tears were rolling down his face. And he said to me, ‘ Meggie, there isn’t another living creature who could have played that scene as you have just played it ! ’ Isn’t that wonderful, Mummy ? Oh, I feel so bucked ! ” She paused a minute, and then she said : “ I made them all cry. But, oh, it’s such a wonderful part ! ”

This letter, which I have received from Edward Percy, deals with this episode very touchingly :

“ DEAR MADAME ALBANESI,—You ask me to tell you a little about Meggie and her last part—‘ Joan Potten ’ in *A Magdalen’s Husband*. The play—a dramatisation by Milton Rosmer and myself of Vincent Brown’s famous novel—is the story of a village girl who for a time has ‘ gone wrong,’ but has reformed and married a drunken peasant,

who brutally ill-uses her. Quite innocently, she has inspired the love of a young gardener, Zeekel, and he, to save her from the torture of the marriage, murders Potten. Suspicion attaches to a base crony of Potten's, but it is Joan who divines the truth and influences Zeekel to give himself up. The character demands great emotional restraint, simplicity, and 'the very atmosphere of the earth.'

"Meggie had never played anything like it before; and Mr. Dean, who was at first opposed to her attempting it, said to me jocularly: 'An orchid can't play a cabbage.' After she had been finally cast for the part, I repeated this in jest to Meggie, who replied, with one of her amazing smiles: 'But, you see, I'm not an orchid, and "Joan" isn't a cabbage!'

"Mr. Dean has, I believe, publicly expressed the opinion that her creation of 'Joan' would have been her highest achievement. Undoubtedly, if rehearsals are anything to go by, he is right. Everyone who watched her was moved. After one scene—when Joan is sending her lover to his death, and he comes



Photo by Claude Harris, London

MEGGIE'S SISTER EVA
MRS. AUSTIN H. WILLIAMS

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to bid her good-bye, and they read together from the old rustic Bible, haltingly and in their homely dialect, the story of the Resurrection—I turned round, to find everyone in the auditorium—hardened, professional onlookers—in tears. I shall always carry with me the memory of those rehearsals at the St. Martin's, with the pale, dark-eyed little figure in her grey dress" (strangely enough, all through those last days she wore one simple grey frock with white bands at the throat and wrists, looking, indeed, a very Puritan) "moving among the shadows and the lights of the bare, cavernous stage, and speaking St. John's glorious simplicities in that queer, husky voice which plucked so sharply at one's heart and was so cruelly near to its own last silence. There was an intense spirituality in her rendering of the character such as I have never seen on the stage before or since. It was almost unearthly. It was as if her soul were shining through her body. Now I think it was because, without knowing it, she was really dying all the while, and was, in some strange way, exalted by the imminence of death.

“ She died on the day of what was to have been the dress rehearsal.

“ Believe me, always yours most sincerely,
“ EDWARD PERCY.”

In a letter I had from Basil Dean after she was gone, he wrote :

“ Her career would have been a great one. Her final rehearsals for her new part will live for always with those who were privileged to see them. At the very least she has left an imperishable memory, and an example to all young actresses of her generation. The little St. Martin's Theatre will never be the same thing again. I am heart-broken, but at least I was privileged to work with her for a little while. That will always be a blessed memory.”

From one of the company who was rehearsing with her I had another most eloquent testimony to the tragic splendour of Meggie's acting in this play.

And yet, though she was succeeding so

wonderfully, she was haunted by that feeling that in some way or other she would be prevented from playing it.

“ You know what I am, Mummy,” she said a day later. “ Something always happens when I have a fine part to play. It started even when I was at the Academy. It’s queer, isn’t it, Mummy? I have great luck, and yet I am not lucky.” And then she said to me—and her voice was broken—“ Oh, mother darling, if I *don’t* play this part I shall die ! ”

Of course, I comforted her. I took a very prosaic view of the matter, and I pointed out that, as usual, she was overtired and overstrained, and she was letting her nerves get the better of her. And then I went back on the old question—no proper food, no rest, and now it was lessons, rehearsals, studies, acting, all tugging together against the frail strength of the child.

She went out very little in those later days. It is true she was at a dance on the Monday before her death, but she had begun to eschew late nights. She was, in fact, growing, and understanding that youth could not be squandered

indefinitely. It was about her birthday-time that she had said this to me :

“ Mummy, I want a home. I want this flat to be a home. Now it’s just a flat and nothing else. I want to knock off going so much to restaurants. I know you can help me, darling, can’t you? And I know that Daddy will come and make my rooms look beautiful and homelike.”

Well, we both of us took up this task. The furniture of the flat was dispensed with, and we put other furniture in. Her father gave her prints, and put them up himself, and when all was done she sent this little letter to my husband.

“ DADDY DEAREST,—I simply can’t thank you enough for making my little flat so wonderful! You seem to have given me all the prints I wanted, and certainly they are all beautiful. I almost feel I had arranged it myself, because it is so exactly how I wanted it to look! I hope you have not tired yourself arranging it for me, and I do hope you won’t miss any of the lovely things you have sent me.

“When you have some more spare moments, won’t you come and visit me in my adorable home?”

“All my love, dearest, and many more thanks.

“Your

“MEGGIE.”

Among other things, her father gave her a bookcase, and books poured in on her. Hansard Watt gave her a set of Jane Austen, I remember, among other book gifts, and she had a number of plays and poems. I think it was our friend Golding Bright who introduced her to Harrison Ainsworth, and she became so engrossed in these old stories that she would sit reading in her dressing-room up to the last minute before taking her cue, and then would rush back to the book the moment she got off the stage. Just for a time, a year or so before, Meggie had been reading what I regarded as very pernicious literature. I have no idea from whom she got the books which I found scattered about her flat, but it gave me a pang to see them there. In connection with this, I remember on one

occasion I took up a novel which was not to be easily obtained and asked if I might take it home to read. She answered me quite gravely :

“ No, darling, I don’t want you to read that book, because it will make you very unhappy ” ; and then she added : “ I never want you to be unhappy, my own Mummy.”

I did not take the book, and I made no remark, but I rejoiced to see that little by little she worked away from these ugly books and from the morbid Russian novels. It was all part of that turning to the sun, as it were, and holding out her hands to all that was sweet, and good, and necessary, in books, and friends, and pursuits.

There was a time when I felt rather as if I, as a writer, must lurk in the background, not being sufficiently modern or strong, weaving my stories about everyday human individuals instead of the abnormal types, and leaving the question of sex (as it is understood to-day) out of my books altogether. I convinced myself that I was looked upon as a “ darling,” of course, but that I was just a “ pretty, pretty ” writer—one who always had a good little girl

for a heroine. Judge, then, of my surprise one day when Meggie rang me up on the telephone to tell me that she had not gone to sleep until three o'clock in the morning because she had taken up my novel, *Susannah and One Elder*, and had been reading it through. And then she said :

“ I love it, Mummy ! It was you, and it was so fresh and sweet. It took me back to the farm ; it was like a breath of the country air. Well, I couldn't put it down until I had finished it ! ”

I felt deeply touched and proud when Meggie said this to me, and I have always given these words a place among my most treasured memories.

With the advent of our furniture, and pictures, and ornaments, the flat took on a most charming aspect. And I also was able to induce a certain admirable woman (Mrs. Tamplin), who had worked for me when I had my own house, to go to the flat and be, in a sense, Meggie's house-keeper on certain days. There was a house-keeper at the flats, a dear, good soul who loved the child, but she was always overworked, and

Meggie liked to spare her trouble. Mrs. Tamplin would cook a dainty luncheon, or a little dinner, and the child was so happy being able to entertain in her own abode that she told me she never wanted to go out of the flat !

The Sunday before she died—December 2nd—her father and I went to have tea with her, and she then signed some of her latest photographs and gave them to us, and she sent off her Christmas presents to her sister and her little nieces, one of whom was her god-daughter, Carol Curtis-Brown (usually called Bobbity). Meggie had a godson also—Simon, the little boy of Lieutenant-Commander Kershaw (the celebrated footballer who plays for the Navy) and his wife. “Babe” Kershaw was one of my girl’s closest friends.

I did not see her on Monday or Tuesday ; I ought to have lunched with her at the Ivy, but I was not at all well, and could not go. She sent me up a sweet little note by cab from the restaurant, as she had to go back to the rehearsals. In this note she asked me if she might come and dine with us, but, as Lorn had told me that she was very tired (and getting

very anxious about the play, which was to be produced a week later), I rang through to her and stopped her coming to dinner, entreating her instead to rest before going to the theatre.

On Wednesday she invited me and a friend to dine with her. She had got two seats for us at the St. Martin's to see *The Likes of Her*, and we met her at the Ivy. She looked very white and tired when she joined us at dinner, and then she told me that she had been that afternoon to see the play *Outward Bound*. Evidently the play had made a very unhappy impression upon her. Anyway, she made me give her a solemn promise that I would never go to see it, and she then said she wished with all her heart that she had not gone!

"I wanted to see Freddie Cooper," she explained, "and he really gave a wonderful performance. In fact, they are all extraordinarily good, but it's the play—the suggestions in the play, the strange influence in it—which has upset me so much."

When our performance was over at the St. Martin's, I was very much tempted to go next door and just say "good-night" to Meggie.

I felt fretted and unhappy ; there was something about her this night—I could not describe what—that made my heart ache in a new way. But it was raining, and the friend who was with me was not an old friend, and I felt I must get back to the hotel with her, so I resolved not to go to the child's dressing-room.

Perhaps, in a sense, it is a good thing I did not go. I have heard since that she was terribly depressed and unhappy all through that last performance, and, when the curtain fell at the end, she ran, without taking her call, straight away from the stage into her dressing-room, and flung herself into Patty's arms. She broke down and cried, saying her luck was out, and she knew positively she would never play the new part.

The sound of her weeping brought Gertrude Kingston to her, and one and all ministered to her, and gave her sympathy and encouragement, and finally she grew calmer, and she was taken back to her flat. In speaking of this to the surgeon after her death, he told me that she must have been dreadfully ill all that Wednesday ; in fact, he added he did not know how she

could have gone on playing, and rehearsing, and carrying on her daily life, for she must have been suffering so much.

A week before this she had come in very tired from a *matinée*, and I had said to her :

“ Meggie darling, don’t you think you could have your understudy play for you at *matinées* ? Now that you are rehearsing, surely that could be arranged ? As a matter of fact, I think you ought to have as much rest as possible before you appear in this new play.”

She did not answer me at once ; she cuddled herself up in one of the big chairs I had given her, and then she said :

“ I am not going to ask for a holiday, Mummy. You know it’s a very bad thing for an actress as young as I am not to keep faith with the public. I have had too much illness already, and I don’t want to do anything to hurt my position.”

Then she looked at me, and she gave me a smile.”

“ I know,” she said. “ I know, darling ! *You* think I am the only pebble on the beach ! But, believe me, if I drop out—and I might be

turned off, you know, at any time," she added—"well, there are dozens, not only ready, but equal to taking my place."

And then she gave her usual speech :

"I'm quite all right, Mummy darling. Really, if I were only a little bit more sensible, and did not get so flustered and so nervous, there would be nothing the matter with me at all. But it's this constant anxiety about my voice—that's what bothers me."

Well, on the morning following that little dinner at the Ivy she rang me up and said she was feeling much better, and she added :

"I'm going to see if I can get out of going to rehearsal this morning. If I can, darling, do come down and lunch with me. Are you free?"

I told her that I was afraid I was engaged for lunch, but that I would go to her in the afternoon. And then she said :

"Very well then ; I'll let you know."

As it happened, I had some business to attend to, and I went out. And then, yielding to an impulse which I cannot explain, I took a taxi and drove to the flat. And Meggie met

me literally dancing about at the top of her stairs. She was full of excitement, and she said to me :

“ Where have you been, gadding about in this way? I thought you never went out in the mornings. I have been ringing, and ringing ; we didn’t know where to get hold of you. Because I’ve some news for you. I’m going away, Mummy. Yes, the management think that I ought to have two or three days’ complete rest for my voice. You see, it’s very tired, and I suppose I have overstrained it as usual. And so I’m going to Broadstairs.”

Everything was in confusion and bustle in her flat. Lorn was packing, and there were one or two other people there. And then she pushed me into one of the big chairs, and she sat on my knee, and she put her arms round my neck.

“ Oh, Mummy, Mummy, aren’t I the limit? Always crocking up just when I’ve got something very important to do. Well, I shall have two or three nice days’ rest and then I’ll be all right.”

I said to her :

“That’s good! Shall I come with you, darling?”

She paused, and then she said:

“No, I think I had better go by myself. Because if you come with me we’ll talk, and what I have to do now is not to use my voice, but just to rest it. I shall have a big fire made in the bedroom, and I’ll have the bed pulled up near the window, and I’ll wrap myself up in furs and things, and so I’ll get the sea air. And I have such a lot of reading to do! But you might come down on Saturday. I must be back on Sunday for the dress rehearsal. Yes, come down on Saturday.”

She left the flat before I did, because she had arranged to lunch with some friends, and she went away quite gaily. I sent her a telegram, to be at the hotel to greet her when she got to Broadstairs, and then I went to my luncheon, and I did the rest of my engagements, and not a shadow of apprehension crept into my thoughts, although, of course, I was always anxious about Meggie.

I told her particularly not to write letters, and she promised that I should have a telegram

on Friday. The telegram never came, and I was sitting in my room reading, about seven o'clock in the evening of Friday, when Dr. Gates appeared. He told me that he had been rung through from Broadstairs by a certain doctor who was desired by Meggie to get in touch with him, so that he could let me know (and also let the theatre know) that she was not well, and was in a nursing-home.

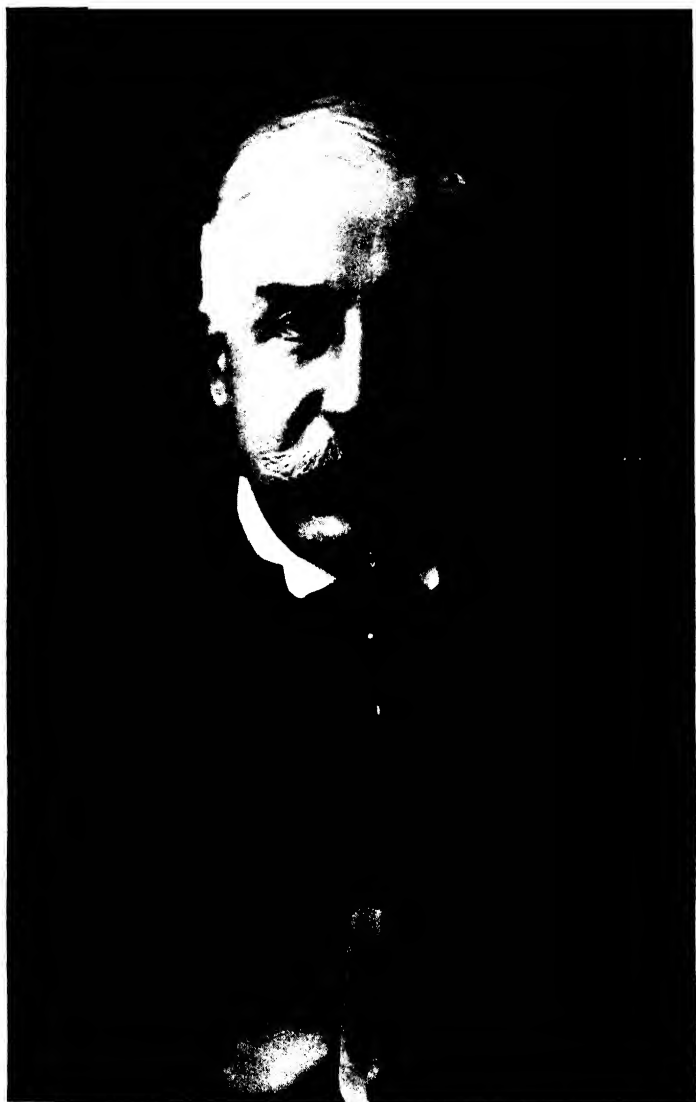
Of course, my anxiety burst into a flame of fears. A nursing-home! The words had an ominous sound. I was assured that there was no need for any anxiety; it was only that she had apparently contracted a gastric chill, that she had been taken ill in the train, and it had been considered better for her to go to a nursing-home instead of going to the hotel.

As a matter of fact, I learnt afterwards that when she came back from her luncheon to the flat to pick up her suit-case she was feeling so ill that Mrs. Tamplin entreated her not to go to Broadstairs. The child confessed that she was in great pain, but nothing could move Meggie. No, she must go! She *must* keep faith with the management, and once she could

get down to Broadstairs everything would be all right. She was taken to the station by some friend and put in the train, and it was while she was in the train that the tragedy commenced.

A certain fellow-traveller, passing along the corridor of the Pullman, saw her stretched out across the table in a small compartment, her head on her arms, and, hearing her groaning, went to the conductor and asked if that young lady was travelling alone. When she heard that no one was with Meggie, this good, sweet, motherly woman went to the child. She made my heart contract when she told me that when she spoke, Meggie stretched out her hands to her, and said : " Don't leave me ! Don't leave me ! "

When, some time later, I met this dear woman, she told me that she thought at once it was an attack of appendicitis, and she did everything possible for the child. They made a kind of bed in the train, and she put Meggie down on it, got a hot-water bottle filled, and generally took care of her. And then, to her surprise, she learnt the identity of this little



MEGGIES FATHER
CAVALIERE UFFICIALE CARLO ALBANESE

sick person. And immediately she said to Meggie :

“Now I am not going to let you go to the hotel, my dear child. I am going to take you home.”

As a matter of fact, when they arrived at Broadstairs, Meggie was conveyed in her car to her house. It was when the doctor came, and Meggie told him quietly that she did not think she ought to remain in a strange house, although she was receiving such amazing kindness, and also that she had had a very serious operation in the early part of the year, that Dr. Brightman decided, and arranged, that she should go to a nursing-home. He did not apparently consider her condition serious until late on Friday night (much later than when he had informed Dr. Gates that all Meggie was suffering from was a gastric chill), but then, it seems, very grave symptoms appeared.

And the next day, in utter ignorance, I travelled down from London, with Mrs. Loraine, in the same carriage with the surgeon who had been summoned to operate on my child. It was Meggie's command that I should not be told she was so ill.

"I won't have my mother worried," she said again and again.

And so I had no preparation for all I had to go through. I feel that it is necessary here to state that this operation was, as it were, a second edition of the first one. I do this because a rumour ran round London that Meggie had been operated on for her throat ; as a matter of fact, this was stated in every paper—I suppose because the information had been given that she had gone to the sea to rest her voice before playing a very big emotional part. Her lack of voice, as the surgeon said to me later, had been purely symptomatic. She had been so ill that the marvel is that she had lasted so long !

When I arrived at the nursing-home on Saturday I was taken up to Meggie's room, and the moment she saw me she was so glad ! But oh ! she was so changed ! And when I kissed her she said :

"I told you, didn't I ? I'm the limit, Mummy. Here I am ! And they say they've got to operate. Well, I don't care what they do as long as they stop the dreadful sickness ! "

The nurses told me afterwards that, to

impress me with the idea that she was not so ill, Meggie begged them to give her a fan, and she was fanning herself vigorously when I went into the room. She was so full of thought about me. Indeed, the last words she said to Lorn Loraine were :

“ Take care of my darling Mummy.”

Into the agony I endured during and after the operation I cannot go. If it had not been for Mrs. Loraine I cannot say what I would have done in the awful hours of the evening and night. I pleaded to be allowed to stay at least near my child, but this was refused. I suppose they were afraid I might suffer too much and lose grip on myself. They did not know me, of course ! I think I must be terribly strong, or surely I should have died myself when she died ?

They performed a life or death operation that Saturday, and then it was discovered that the abscess had formed again and had broken. Meggie's death was caused by intestinal perforation, and there was no hope of saving her.

I got her father down on the Sunday morning. I sent a note up to London on Saturday

afternoon, but I did not tell my husband in that note that she had had this very grave operation. I merely said she was ill, that I should have to stay down with her, and I required clothes, and I begged him to come by the early express train on the following morning. I rang him up that night from the hotel, saying I had not been permitted to stay at the nursing-home, but that I would meet him at the station.

When her father came the next morning, I have always said that Meggie played one of the best parts in her life ; indeed, both she and her father acted magnificently. Albanesi had the faculty of meeting real trouble so quietly, so splendidly, so courageously, although throughout his life little things would fret him and worry him.

But there is no manner of doubt that my husband got his death-sentence that Sunday morning, December 9th, for he only arrived in Broadstairs station at about twenty minutes past twelve, and by a quarter to one Meggie's life on earth was ended ! We drove in silence to the nursing-home, and then, first asking for a

priest to be brought immediately, he insisted upon going straight up to his child's room. He had seen in my face the tragedy that was in my heart.

They spoke together in Italian, and he was holding her hand. I left them together, and he has told me she greeted him almost gaily and expressed great happiness at seeing him, and then, after they had exchanged a few words, she suddenly said :

“ *Dove mia madre ?* ”

“ Do you want mother ? ” her father asked.

She nodded her head. And they brought me upstairs.

She never spoke again.

Everything that thought, and care, and science could do for the child was done. I was too stunned to cry, but all the others—the nurses (and there were three or four), the doctor, who was a stranger to her—all were in tears ; in fact, Dr. Brightman wrote to me later that though, in his long professional career, he had been present at many deaths, he had never been more touched than on that particular morning. And he added that, though he had

only known her three days, it was more than sufficient to realise her sweetness.

Just as she had sighed out of life the priest came, a dear little old Italian priest, and they left us alone with him as he said the prayers. Afterwards he tried to console us, and just before he went away he stood looking down on her, and he said :

“ What a beautiful little girl ! ”

She had looked so terrible when I saw her that first thing in the morning—nothing of beauty left but her eyes ; those wonderful eyes ! But all that was ugly and disfiguring had disappeared in death. Her face had filled out, and she looked just as she had looked when she was about ten or eleven years old.

All that followed is like a confused dream. How I got her poor father back to London I really do not know ! Good and kind friends met us at the station and drove us home. But it was the night that followed that was so terrible. It is a memory of an anguish indescribable. Each hour I feared that my dear, my beloved husband was going to leave

me and follow her into the grave ; he was so broken, so prostrated, so weak, so ill. I held him in my arms all through the night. It was the forerunner of so many, many other nights when during the last year of his life he suffered constant and almost intolerable pain. This will be understood when it is known that his illness was that grievous disease angina pectoris.

Undoubtedly Meggie must have inherited her gallant spirit from her father. Here again is where they were so much alike ! As I have described, no matter how tired, or worn, or ill she might have felt, she never let the outside world know this, except that perhaps her delicacy was too apparent ; but it was never her wish to be pitied, and nothing would make her desert her work. So with my husband ; notwithstanding the fact that at least in my eyes he was visibly failing during the last year of his life, I never could induce him to take rest for more than perhaps twenty-four hours.

No one knows better than I do the satisfaction that work gives one, and I am convinced that, had he been cut away sharply from his daily tasks, it would have been a very disastrous

matter. So I never protested very strongly when he would insist on dressing and going forth at the usual time, and up to the very last he always looked what he had ever been—an unusually handsome, I might say a beautiful man.

And not a creature in the hotel—guests, I mean—ever imagined that this graceful, courteous, handsome man, whom they admired so much, was very, very ill. But there were a few who did know the truth—members of the staff who shared with me some of the anguish I suffered in those nights of pain and prostration. Without these humbler friends, I really don't know how I should have managed. But they were so good, so helpful. I think they were all proud of him; I know that they loved him; and his determination to carry on, no matter at what cost, provoked admiration from them.

After I had lost him, and I came in contact with one or two of his pupils whom I knew he was seeing frequently, and I questioned them and spoke about his health, it amazed me (even knowing him as well as I did!) to be told that

they had never noticed anything wrong. He had never told them about his nightly ordeals of pain. That was a matter that lay between himself and me and his doctors, and one or two members of the hotel staff about whom I have just written. I shall never cease to be grateful for the blessed privilege that was granted to me to do everything that was humanly possible to minister to him, nor shall I ever cease to give homage both to him and to his child for their wonderful courage and consideration for others. They were, indeed, very much alike, Meggie and her father !

The way that kinspeople and friends—one might almost say the world—hastened to give us sympathy and comfort, if possible, in those first days of tragic separation from our child is something which I cannot find words to describe, but which can never be forgotten. Letters and telegrams and messages flowed in from almost every part ; they came from Royalty, passing through practically every section of society, comprising the most touching tributes from the humbler members of the

theatre, stage staffs, cloakroom attendants, commissionaires, all manner of people who had come in contact with the child in some way or other, and who mourned with us in our great loss.

It is not possible to print one tithe of the letters that came, but I will just quote a few, and I will start with one from Sir James Barrie. It is an answer to one from me. I may state here that one of Meggie's unfulfilled ambitions was to have taken part in one of the productions of *Peter Pan*. I don't think she aspired to play "Peter," but I do know she wanted very much to play "Wendy." She had an enormous admiration for Barrie's work; something in him seemed to appeal to her. The few times that she came in contact with him he was always so kind to her, and I remember that she told me one night when she was having a little dinner at the Ivy he was sitting at a table alone, and at last she plucked up courage sufficient to go across and speak to him. He then told her that he wanted to have a little talk with her, and that he would write and make an appointment. This excited her very much indeed,

and she discussed the possibilities of the outcome of that talk with me.

This is Sir James's letter :

"DEAR MADAME ALBANESI,—You must let me answer as I want to do so ; it was indeed only from fear of intruding that I did not write to you at the moment. I feel very, very sorry for you in this tragic happening, for indeed it was nothing less, and even a comparative stranger, like myself, sees her now as if she must still be alive, abounding in the vitality that overfilled her.

"I had an intense admiration for Meggie's work, and believe there were exceptional glories lying in front of her. That talk I was to have with her was to be about a part I expect I shall never write now. But she did not need the authors to the extent that they needed her.

"Yours sincerely,

"J. M. BARRIE."

Just as the musical world hastened to write touching sympathy to my husband, so the

literary world turned to me to give expression of the grief they felt for me. I prize especially a letter which Robert Hichens wrote to me just after her death.

“DEAR MADAME ALBANESI,—Although we have never met, I cannot help writing to you to tell you of my distress at the death of your daughter. I met her at Brighton, and spent a great while in her company, and have never been able to forget her charm and sweetness. I admired her very much on the stage, and was looking forward to her having an exceptionally brilliant career. But it was she herself as a human being, not only as an actress, who struck me so much, and I am shocked to read of her death, and feel a personal grief about it. There was something delicious in her look and personality; I am deeply sorry for you, and send you all my sympathy in this grievous and unexpected loss.”

Another fine writer, Mr. J. D. Beresford, wrote to me from the South of France sympathising

with my husband and myself, and he says in his letter :

“ We were greatly upset, both of us, when we saw the tragic news. We both admired your daughter’s genius, and, although we had never spoken to her, regarded her, in a way, as someone whom we knew quite well. It is terribly, terribly sad.”

I appreciate so much a letter I had from Mr. Grant Richards, written on December 23rd, 1923. This is how the letter runs :

“ DEAR MADAME ALBANESI,—When my son died, your letter—the letter of a stranger—helped me by its kindness, and I feel that I may write to tell you how grieved I was, on returning to England from America a few days ago, to hear of your loss.

“ About three weeks past, my wife and I were dining with Mr. Crosby Gaige, a theatrical manager in New York. The one other guest was Mr. Walcott (?), a dramatic

critic of the *New York Herald*. My wife asked him, apropos of the English theatre, who of all of the English actresses appeared to be the finest in promise. His answer came without question. Your daughter he named. That is what everyone has said, but nevertheless I thought you would like to hear so unprompted a verdict."

I quote from a part of a letter which I received from Gertrude Kingston, whose article on Meggie and her work I have already alluded to. It was an article which made a very direct appeal to my husband.

"Of course, you must feel as if the world had come to an end for you. That is the penalty of the joys of motherhood when the bird flies out of the nest and is hurt and bruised to death away from the mother's wing. The only fact that emerges for us out of the darkness is that it is a very short and transitory passage for all of us mortals, and that we could not be made to suffer as we do if there were not afterwards some

survival to compensate us. Your pretty, clever, generous little Meggie has passed over with 'all her honours thick upon her' rather than faded away after disappointments and disillusion. God rest her soul! She is spared much that you and I have been through."

The news of Meggie's death was a terrible shock to Clemence Dane, and she wrote to say that she could not possibly express all that she felt.

"The affection and admiration I have always felt for Meggie makes me guess a little what a tragic loss this is to you and to her father. She was growing into a great artist, and she was loved. What more could one say in farewell? The last time I saw her, only ten days ago, she was so sweet; she always was such a dear child in her way with me, and so full of her plans. What hadn't she planned? I don't know now what we are going to do without her; she was like no one else."

Haidée Wright was deeply attached to Meggie, and I cherish the letter she wrote to me.

“One is dumb and heartsick in the face of such a shock, such a grief, such a loss. Well, it may be some grain of comfort in the future to know that your great sorrow is everybody’s sorrow to-day, that so well beloved is dear, dear little Meggie that a great wave of love, sheer tenderness of love, has passed over the whole of London at the news. My dearest love and tenderest thoughts for you and our darling little Meggie.”

From John Hastings Turner I had another touching letter. He says :

“Her death will be as much a disaster to the theatre as to her friends.”

I knew that Mr. Kenneth Barnes, the administrator of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, was very deeply interested in Meggie, and that he had been seeing her rather frequently just before the end.

“How tragic this is,” he wrote to me. “Meggie had several talks with me recently when she came up here for the lectures, mostly about her work. . . . In my opinion she was incontestably the most brilliant actress who has ever been trained here, and also the one from whom the most brilliant future on the stage was assured.

“The memory of those little talks with her are still visibly in my mind, and I could not help being aware of a change in her recently which made her easier to talk to about things which touched upon the deeper side of life. It is all very, very sad; the only comfort seems to be that there was in her a light which shone out in her art, and which one was aware of in talking to her—a light that one feels somehow will never be put out.”

This is what Anthony Hope Hawkins wrote me in March 1924 :

“I had not the privilege of knowing your daughter in private life, but I admired her work on the stage very highly. It bore the
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promise of great things, and this was recognised. I think never have I known the loss of one so young more generally deplored, and counted as a loss to art. This could not console you in such a great sorrow, and yet it must have, and ought to have, given you pride, and a sad pleasure."

Meggie always admired the books written by Mrs. Alice Williamson, and I very much regretted that we saw so little of this delightful writer.

"MY DEAR MADAME ALBANESI,—I have just come back from America and heard the terribly sad news about your wonderful girl, whom everybody loved and admired so much. Do let me tell of how I grieve for you. I am shocked and distressed beyond words. Such a grief is almost beyond comparing. The one comfort is how glorious for her to go on the top of the wave, happy, beloved, and talented."

I have already spoken of the numberless offerings of sympathy from my husband's

pupils and musical colleagues and from many writers who (some of them unknown to me except by name) hastened to give us remembrance in our hour of tragedy, and there were naturally a few whose friendship was a precious possession to us. Dear Mr. Aguet, Esposito, Annette White, Victor Booth, Rosina Cerasoli (brilliant little artist), the Cobhams, who had loved our girl as though she had been their own child, my niece May, my kinswoman Vera Astley-Rushton, and Alice Macdonell, who was the one woman friend who exercised the most beautiful influence in my husband's life. Not a young woman, but one who had suffered a loss as tragic as our own, Mrs. Macdonell intellectually, spiritually, and humanly was closest in musical sympathy and inspiration with Albanesi. Hers was indeed a very rare and exquisite friendship and one to which he clung to the very end.

But it is simply impossible to set down very clearly all that happened. The desire to help to give courage to both of us was so great it overwhelmed us. Afterwards, certain stories which I heard would almost cause me to break

down again. For instance, I was told that on the night of her funeral a young actor and an actress friend of hers simply walked the streets all the night, they could not go to rest !

From Edna Best, who was playing her twin sister in *The Lilies of the Field*, there came two letters. I print them both.

“ I am very bad at expressing what I feel, but I would like you to know—or, rather, would like to be allowed to tell you—how I feel for you. If at any time I can do anything at all to help you, I wish you would remember me. I admired her so ; I was devoted to her. I don't suppose she ever knew how much.”

In the second letter she wrote :

“ Somehow I have an extraordinary feeling that Meggie has not gone ! The theatre seems full of her. I am moving down into her dressing-room for a reason that I cannot state, but just feel. I should like you to

know of this, in case at any time I can do anything for you ; because you will know there is someone in whom her death means much more than just the passing of a soul, and the tributes that follow. This is abominably expressed, but perhaps you will understand.

“ Yours ever,

“ EDNA.”

Noel Coward and Meggie were deeply attached, and I did not need him to express in words his sorrow and the loss her death signified to him ; but he wrote me several letters, and I quote a few words from one of them :

“ It is utterly impossible to write what one really feels. Meggie will always be a very dear and sweet memory to me, and I shall always mourn her. I fully understand how utterly meaningless life must seem to you now that she has gone.

“ If anyone in the world deserves eternal happiness it is Meggie, and perhaps because she was such a darling to us here we

may be given the chance of meeting her again."

Athole Stewart, who played her father in *The Skin Game*—he was always "Dodo" to her, the name she called him in the play—sent me the following little letter :

"What can I say?" he wrote to me.

"What can anyone say? The pity and the tragedy of it, and the blow falling heaviest of all on the mother of such a wonderful daughter.

"One goes about just dazed and not able to realise it."

Ever since they were tiny children Eva and Meggie had had a great friend and admirer in Mr. F. H. Richmond. He was a kind of fairy-godfather to them and he was one of the first to whom the tragic news was conveyed.

"Words are totally inadequate to tell you how shocked I was to hear of Meggie's death," he wrote, "or to express my sympathy in this great, this irreparable loss. The best I can

hope is that time, the great healer, will help you to bear your grief. She was born to a glorious future, and the world at large can ill afford the loss of one so brilliant, and will weep with you."

Julia Neilson sent me just a few words :

" You two poor parents must both know how heart-broken both Fred and myself are ! What a loss to our stage ! Our brilliant little Meggie ! We know what you are suffering and we grieve with you."

I knew from a letter I had from Viola Tree at that tragic time that she was terribly grieved, and lately she has sent me this tribute :

" Because she was trained from the first for a theatrical career, and because she was beautiful and loved, and because she had no set-backs till the end of her young life when her health gave way, Meggie had unique opportunities of being a really great actress had she lived. It is always easy to say so-and-so might have been or so-and-so would

have been a remarkable artist. We say it of Rupert Brooke, of Flecker, of Dennis Brown the musician. All had their lives cut off early. And there are others like Shelley, Keats, and Byron, who "in a short time" fulfilled a long time, and had time to leave their mark on the world. Who can say what is really great acting? One with the touch of genius, who is a technically qualified judge, said that only twice could he remember very great acting: 'Sir Henry Irving's good-bye in *Charles the First*, moments in Mrs. Patrick Campbell's *Magda*, and perhaps,' he added, 'just for a fleeting moment, Yvonne Printemps in *Mozart*.' An epicure perhaps, for it seems to me I have seen very many great moments in acting, and do still.

"Meggie did not perhaps have the chance of a very great part in which she could prove herself great, but that is a very great word. Perfection in all she did was certainly hers. In *A Bill of Divorcement*, in *Loyalties*, in another little grim tragedy by Galsworthy where she played a little Czecho-Slovak girl,

in *Trelawney*, in *The Lilies of the Field*, there was nothing that could be criticised. She was a little creature, yet she had the repose and dignity of big people. She had a perfectly produced voice and the resolution never to exaggerate or make a false note. In spite of a fiery temperament, she had what seems essential to success in modern plays—the English girl quality, and the quality of being a lady in the best sense of the word. The most remorseless and jealous of rivals and the most bitter of back numbers never had anything but praise for her. There never seemed to be any doubt that she had got there, and by hard work. I wish I had known her more intimately, and what was going on in her mind and heart, for I am sure there must have been a great deal.

“VIOLA TREE.”

Edna Best was one of the many who tried to give me consolation and courage. On one occasion much later she told me of a strange little incident which happened to her when she went out on tour with *The Lilies of the*

Field, in which she played Meggie's part. In the second act, the girl Elizabeth in the play has to wear a very prim but very pretty brown silk crinoline dress, with a little lace cap. I knew from Meggie that she and Edna generally had a little joke between themselves when this part came in the play. Well, on one night when Edna was in the provinces acting, and had just changed and put on this particular brown silk dress, and was moving down the stage in sedate fashion, she told me she came to a sudden standstill, forgot her lines : forgot everything for the moment, because there in front of her was Meggie, standing dressed exactly as she was dressed and giving her the well remembered demure smile. It appears that just for a little while Edna could not speak or move. Then the vision vanished, and she took up her part again. Afterwards, when she was asked what had happened, she could not explain. But she assured me she certainly had seen Meggie !

Several other people have spoken of having had fleeting visions of the child ; notably a well-known novelist, who told me that he had



REMEMBER
MEGGIE ALBANESI
AN ARTIST, WHO DIED IN
THE SERVICE OF THE THEATRE
DECEMBER 9 1923

R · I · P

COVER BY BENJ. DEAN

not only seen her, but spoken to her ; that she had looked radiantly happy and was laughing. From another—a young actor—I had a similar story, and he described a gown she wore. I am not psychic, and so I have had no visible manifestation, but I do know that her spirit is near me—very near ; more especially since her father left me.

Moreover, messages have come through to me from various sources—strange, almost unbelievable messages, but always conveying the suggestion that Meggie is near me, asking for me, thinking of me—and this has uplifted my heart and my spirit in a manner that is inexpressibly beautiful.

I wish that I had space in which to quote more from the letters that poured in on us. From America there came expressions of grief and sympathy from Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lille, and many other English actors and actresses. In fact, the proof that she was mourned in America was brought forward in fullest measure when a midnight performance was given in New York for the purpose of collecting funds to be sent to the subscription

list for the Memorial Scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. This scholarship, together with the beautiful plaque put up by Basil Dean in the vestibule of St. Martin's Theatre, with the simple but touching inscription :

Remember Meggie Albanesi
An Artist who died in the Service
of the Theatre,

make, of course, tangible and enduring tributes to her memory.

But there is encircling her something even more wonderful—remembrances too deep, too wide, too eloquent, and too far-reaching ever to fade away. The influence of these helped considerably to console her father and myself, and now are a consolation to her sister and her mother.

Earlier in this little book I have alluded to the fact that I now realise there must have been something very unusual about Meggie, something arresting as it were: something that put her just a little apart from those among whom she lived and worked. There

have been many definitions as to this power which she possessed so unconsciously. Myself, I attribute it to the fact that she was very human—full of sympathy and of love. She gave love, she imparted love, and she got love back in return.

In a very remarkable article written by James Douglas of the *Sunday Express* the week after her death, he set forth his views about her. He knew her as a little child. His boy Brian, who was killed in the war, used to come to our house, with so many other of those beautiful boys who died that England might live.

We kept a kind of open house for these young people on Sunday evenings ; the furniture would be pushed back in the drawing-room, and I was the band. I used to play from the piano scores of *Watch your Step* and other musical plays of that nature, and the girls and boys would dance. And then at about ten o'clock there would be a frantic rush and tearing to and fro, because some of them had to get back to Sandhurst, and some to other camps, and all would go promising to come the next Sunday, but some there were who never came again.

I remember in particular three boys—one an Australian, and two Canadians home on leave—who went away so gaily from our house one Sunday night, back to France, and by the time the next Sunday had come round those three had been killed. Such dear and handsome lads !

Experiences of this nature coming into the intimate life of the very young, especially those who were impressionable, emotional, and highly strung, cast lasting shadows on young minds and hearts. The war was a forcing-house ; children scarcely out of the schoolroom were brought in contact with events and experiences they might never have known in normal times. To my two girls, the snatching away of their young comrades in such a brutal fashion left them stunned, because they were incapable of grasping the significance of all that was passing round them.

Having no brothers of their own, they made brothers of all these boys, and when she was grown up, and the war was a thing of the past, on more than one occasion I had reason to know that Meggie still mourned for the boys

with whom she had danced so light-heartedly in the drawing-room to my music.

This is what James Douglas wrote about little Meggie :

“ Why are we hit and hurt so hard by the swift death of a girl of twenty-four ? What’s Hecuba to us that we should weep for her ? Meggie was only a mime ; there are many other pretty mimes whose death would not fill our eyes with elegiac tears. I cannot think of one whose death would move us all like Meggie’s death. Other girls die every day, and the world does not weep. Why did we all call her Meggie, and not Margherita ? Why was she Meggie, and not Miss Albanesi, to us all ? The variety and versatility of her genius, was that the case ? Not altogether. Other young mimes are various and versatile. Was it her youth ? Other clever actresses are young. There was something more than genius and youth in her fragile body. What was it ? It was the enchantment of headlong and reckless, vivid life in her blood, and in her brain, in her eyes, in

her voice, in her hands, and in her feet. She was far more than alive. Even when she was a little girl, her childish charm and witchery irradiated her entire personality. She had the rare gift of giving through every limb and every pore, through every glance and word and gesture. . . . She was tragically keen and uncontrollably eager in her love of life as well as her love of art. It almost seemed that she knew that her magical days were short, and that she was resolved to pack years into months, weeks into days, and days into hours. . . . Whenever she appeared she was adored, for her luminous personality filled the room ; as soon as she entered, nobody could be unaware of her presence, and she was never blurred, or tamed, by popularity or publicity. She was always like Blake's Tiger, burning brightly in the splendour of the night. Some of the loveliest things in life are brief ; sunrise and sunset are quick miracles. It may be that beauty is the soul of genius. It may be that the limit of life is the secret of art. If Meggie had lived more wisely and more

warily, she might not have been the mime of mimes."

A dear old friend of mine, who had known Meggie when she was a wee baby—in fact, came to see me about four or five days after she was born—gave the same tribute in other words to the child. She said to me on one occasion :

" If I were not told that Meggie was in the room, however crowded it might be, I should know that she was there. There was something outreaching in her as sweet and as fragrant as the scent of violets."

With her wonderful gift of loving and being beloved there ran, just as Mr. Douglas has said, that flame of light throughout her days. It was a veritable *joie de vivre*, though it was counteracted every now and then by the Italian morbidity which, as Gertrude Kingston described, overshadows most Italian natures.

But Meggie had the faculty of snatching at happiness as it passed and sharing this happiness with others.

And so I cling to my belief that the fact that she is remembered still so clearly and so sweetly,

and her passing is even now deplored (her death still mourned as signifying a great loss to the profession to which she belonged), is really built up on the fact that, despite her faults and her many mistakes she had a heart of gold, as the saying goes ; that she was never mean or ungenerous, and that she gave all that was best in her to those whom she called her friends and to every task that came her way. To us she was more precious than she ever knew. It is the child we mourned, not the actress. Real life is only lived in dreams and memories, and so when my beloved little Meggie is clearest in my thoughts it is when I recall the times in which I know that she was happy. Her last birthday was one of these days, and I will end this story now by giving those who read it the little note she wrote me that night before she went to bed, reproducing part of this loving little letter in her own handwriting :

15, NEW CAVENDISH STREET,

W.1.

TELEPHONE,
LANGHAM 2743.

Monday.

My dearest Mother! Thank
you for all your goodness

.

You are so very
wonderful & I adore you
I've had a gorgeous
day.

Meggie

